

A TRIANGULAR VIEW

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A
Novel
by
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To
Em Bee
Who Made
Me Brood

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PART ONE

Chapter One

‘What do you want?’

Dev Raj Verma wished he knew: he had just closed the door behind him and was still straining his eyes to see. ‘I, I...’ He fumbled, searching his pockets, his old brief-case between his legs. He could see now: paintings on the wall, potted plants, white men and women drinking. He found his ticket.

‘Fourth class,’ the waiter said, viewing the ticket from a distance.

‘Yes, sorry... sorry. I missed the instruc—’

‘Go back to where you boarded,’ the waiter cut in. ‘This way.’

Dev went out. His eyes blinked in the sunshine. From the ‘A’ deck of the *La Thailana*, Ballard Pier looked crowded: some of the send-offs were hearty, jasmine garlands for the travellers, flash-bulbs popping. He wished his parents had come to see him off but they couldn’t afford the eight hundred mile journey from Delhi to Bombay. However, Mool Chand, his silvery haired grandfather who lived near Bombay, had come but only to insist that Dev eat a sweet-meat, specially blessed, to ward off ‘evil spirits’ on his voyage. To cut short the argument that followed Dev had suddenly run off. He was so agitated that he had misunderstood the steward’s instructions for finding his accommodation and had blundered into the first class lounge.

This time he must listen carefully, Dev told himself, as he walked back to the boarding-point.

Stepping down a series of steep ladders and narrow corridors, he reached the Fourth Class accommodation: a maze of criss-cross steel-tubing and netting. To spend the next ten days in that dungeon with sixty-three passengers!

He felt a pair of cold hands squeezing his stomach. With only five hundred rupees more he could have travelled third class. He threw his brief case into a rack and sank into a hammock. Arjun Aswani would have enjoyed the sight. Last March, Arjun had laughed at Dev's hopes of going to England: 'No passport or passage-money, or a job to go to, and you think you're going to England.'

'I'll be out of the country before the year is over,' Dev had declared impetuously, and put a bet on it.

When their firm's annual report showed a huge profit, the Employees' Union demanded six months' wages as bonus but settled for four, if paid before Divali, the festival of lights. But even that would not have been enough if Dev had not come upon an advertisement for fourth class passages in *The Times of India* that he borrowed regularly from Arjun.

With the money Dev won from Arjun, they had a sumptuous dinner together. With their tall lean bodies and wheatish complexions they looked so alike that they were nicknamed the 'Pakistani Twins' at the works. Arjun's face was smooth and clean shaven; Dev had a pencil moustache and a slight scar on his left cheek.

Thinking of Arjun and his days in Bombay, Dev slipped into a dream filled sleep in which female figures from American glamour magazines, glossy 'French' post-cards and the screens of cinema halls showing Hollywood movies came crowding in . . .

For the first few days Dev did nothing but eat and sleep. Sometimes he would lie on deck and read next to a stocky young man with baggy trousers who spent most of his day sketching in charcoal.

'You're a Panjabi, aren't you?' Dev asked him.

'No, I'm from Delhi. Tiwari is my name,' he replied. 'And you from?'

'Bombay, technically speaking. Originally, from West Panjab. All property lost in Pakistan—hence, the fourth class. Only a government loan could help me finish my engineering degree.'

'Bright future for engineers in India!'

'Only if you're with foreign firms in big cities.'

'Weren't you?'

'Not in the beginning. I was on a government project, drilling irrigation wells. When a Scandinavian firm, Eriks-sons, began drilling wells, I was their government overseer. That was how I manoeuvred to join them.'

'And then get transferred to Bombay,' Tiwari said, smiling. 'I wish I had been taken on by some foreign advertising firm.'

'I managed to get a couple of letters to the British principals of Erikssons. That should help. What about you?'

'I'm a freelance cartoonist, man,' Tiwari replied. 'I'll try my luck in London.'

Tiwari wanted to draw people diving. Together they went to the swimming-pool. Watching the muscular white bodies of the Frenchmen, Dev felt a sense of awe and envy. It struck him that individually as men and collectively as a race they were strong, vigorous and well-fed. In their presence, he felt dark, emaciated and weak: totally inferior.

'Yeeeeeeehoooooooo!' cried Dev as he kissed a handful of dust outside the Marseilles port building. His yell shook the air of France and was lost in the whistles and sirens of ships and locomotives.

Tiwari was bewildered. What's the matter, he was about to ask, when he saw a tram-car, and ran.

'Hurry on tram and train, time and tide; carry me to my Mecca, my England,' Dev mumbled, running—but the train North was not leaving until evening.

Whether it was a narrow winding street or a wide boule-

vard, a crowded quay or a deserted park, a glass-and-chrome café or a run-down bar, Dev wanted to visit them all: he wanted to make the most of his first day in Europe. He inhaled deep and long, for it was European air—the best.

Dawn was breaking when they reached London. Tiwari left for a friend's place; Dev went to an Indian Students' Hostel, an old three storey building in Earls Court.

With only £14 left, Dev couldn't afford to rest. He phoned the firms to which he had letters of introduction. The company official at Kempton was out of town but the one at Cheverly said: 'Come for an interview tomorrow if you are in a hurry.' That left Dev just one day in London.

Browsing through an 'A to Z' guide over a cup of tea in a Lyons, he counted the number of alleys, avenues, arcades . . . roads, streets, terraces, walks and ways: 27,210; the tube-stations—274; cinemas—101 . . . With every detail his opinion of London soared higher. What was Bombay with her measurements of 5,190-50-30 to London's 27,210-274-101? Like a flat-breasted wife before a voluptuous pin-up.

He was as mystified by the oracle of 'Stand clear of the gates' as by the doors closing and opening automatically in lift and train. Looking around he saw women: women with alluring contours, rosy cheeks, seductive lips, exuding dreamy fragrance. And so many of them. His eyes shifted from one to the next . . . never idle.

In the rush of Piccadilly Circus, his old instinct of safeguarding against pickpockets returned: he held tight to his wallet as he followed the 'Way Out' signs. He saw something in perpetual motion: an escalator! He felt scared. One foot forward and then back. He put both his feet on and held tight to the moving rail; the horizontal links under him rose vertically and threw him backward off-balance, but he was saved by a push from the man behind. Hardly had he stabilized himself when he saw the end of the ride. He panicked, stepped off the conveyor too soon and swayed against the man again. Abashed, Dev raced out of the tube-station.

Every time he saw a non-white face, he felt reassured. He was not alone; there were many others like him. In fact, whenever he saw a Negro or an Indian darker than himself, he felt superior. He was convinced that aided by the cold climate and a bleaching cream, he would graduate into the fallow end of the white spectrum.

Oxford Street was crowded with Christmas shoppers. Walking through floors and floors of huge buildings crammed with clothes, cameras, carpets . . . Dev had the sensation of going through an awesome dream in which the pages of glossy magazines and the screens of cinema-halls had become real. He felt stunned and withdrew to a self-service restaurant.

In the privacy of night, Dev lingered long in front of shop windows exhibiting women's underclothing. He was intrigued by a corset, wondering if it went over the thing in between the legs. He hoped it didn't. Back home, even a glance at the ads for ready made bras in the *Filmfare* made girls blush and boys break into sniggers, but here, a woman was stripped bare, leaving nothing to mystery or imagination.

Going down an escalator at a tube station, he looked hard at the ads: 'X' corset, 'Y' underwear, 'B' blanket, 'V' whiskey . . . trousers with 'ppers, bread without starch . . . but not a word about a bleaching cream.

His interview with four officials of the Cheverly Conveyor Company had gone so well that when the director told him the next day that he was not the kind of person they were looking for, Dev's colour faded.

'Wait a minute,' the director said, sucking his pipe. 'There's a chap with a small workshop I know who is looking for a draughtsman. Let me phone him.' He finished his telephone conversation with a toothy smile of triumph.

Dev collected his travel expenses and left.

The owner-director of the small workshop—a large rotund man with short arms—received him with alcoholic cordiality.

'Mine is a small company; you can get anywhere your abilities will take you. You're an Indian but you're my fellow-man,' the rotund man assured Dev, offering him £10 a week.

The wages seemed too low for a man of his experience and qualifications, Dev thought, but his cash was down to £12 and he did not know when the Kempton official would respond to his letter; he accepted the offer and left his London address with the boss's secretary.

He stayed in Cheverly, found himself a single room with a gas ring, paid a deposit and returned to London on Sunday with £8 in his wallet.

Two days passed, three; but still no letter of appointment from the rotund boss. Christmas came and went. The post deliveries became normal. Still no letter.

Dev put through a trunk-call: the rotund boss was out of town. Dev's cash £5-8-3. He wrote a letter asking when he should expect a written offer. Two more days passed. No reply. Cash balance: £4-0-0. If he waited any longer, he would not have enough for the fare to Cheverly. A few days in London had convinced him that he had difficulty in living in its busy complex mangle: he wanted to leave.

He reported for work in Cheverly. He found the rotund boss in his office, elbows on the desk, hostility peering out of his slitty eyes: 'So, you disbelieve my word,' he began sharply. 'Your letter is there --in the waste paper basket.'

'I'm sorry for the misunderstanding. Back home, no one reports for work in an office with a verbal offer. There's always confirmation in writing.' Dev did not like the pleading tone that had crept into his voice.

'The £10 a week you mentioned in your letter, I never offered you that.' ('See what I mean by getting something in writing; then, there's no doubt,' Dev talked back without moving his lips.) 'It'll be £8 a week. Don't forget there's colour prejudice in the country.'

Smouldering with hatred, Dev wanted to grab the fat bastard by the collar and squash his head against the wall.

He felt his hands contract as he moved forward slowly, careful not to alarm the rotund boss. A knock on the door.

'Excuse me,' the boss's secretary said, walking in. 'This is the voucher, and that letter to the Board of Trade.' The spell was broken: Dev remembered the remaining pound-note in his wallet, the penury of his parents. He lit a Woodbine.

The rotund boss signed the papers. The secretary left, throwing a fleeting glance at Dev.

'It's all right': Dev's voice was detached, a shade above a whisper. 'Whatever you say'—adding inaudibly—'you son of a bitch.'

All day and night, Dev brooded over the statement, 'Don't forget there's colour prejudice in the country.' Surely, the rotund boss was lying. This was not America, and he was not a Negro; but even there, as far as he knew, colour prejudice existed only in the South. This was England. No one had yet refused to serve him in a restaurant or made him sit in the rear of a bus or train. Whoever heard of colour prejudice in England?

He wished he would hear from Kempton soon.

Chapter Two

'I'm sure you'll like it here,' the Personnel Manager of the Globe-Kem company said to Dev, handing him the employment documents to sign. 'We have quite a few of your compatriots working for us.'

Dev looked up, surprised. 'What a pit . . .'

'Pity?'

Indiscreet, you ass, you have been indiscreet: Dev rebuked himself silently. He avoided the Personnel Manager's stare by scribbling his name on the dotted line.

'Good,' the Personnel Manager said, taking the signed papers. 'Do you know your way to the company hostel?'

'No. I'm afraid not.'

'Don't worry, it's quite near. When you leave the gate, turn left and walk along the street until you reach the end when you turn right; then first turn on the left, and when you have . . .'

The rest was lost to Dev who was thinking that if the rotund boss at Cheverly had not insisted on exactly one week's notice and his old clock had not stopped in the middle of night, he would have arrived in Kempton on Sunday, or on Tuesday morning instead of the afternoon, and would have been spared the subsequent complication. 'If I were you, I'd have a nice dinner at the hostel before going back to the station for your luggage,' the Personnel Manager concluded, shaking Dev's hand.

In the darkness of the January evening Dev lost his way in the tangle of cobblestone streets and was late for dinner. The manageress, a big flat-breasted woman of sixty, re-

ceived him with a full-dentured smile and led him to the dining-table.

‘Mr Verma, gentlemen,’ she announced.

The diners looked at him—all at once, all fourteen of them. Dev managed a constipated smile and said, ‘Good evening.’ Why were they still staring at him? He wished they had a stronger bulb in the overhanging socket so that his greasy, dark skin would look lighter. Why hadn’t they responded to his greeting yet? At long last he heard a few indistinct ‘Good evenings.’ He fumbled toward an empty chair and fell in it, relieved, only to feel overawed by the sight of a neatly set table, sparkling crockery, shimmering silverware and well dressed white men eating quietly while white-aproned waitresses served them with the efficiency of nurses in an operating-theatre.

He had hardly finished his soup when the prettiest of the waitresses asked him: ‘Are you ready for the main course, Mister Verma?’

M-i-s-t-e-r Verma! Emboldened by her servile manner, he looked up at her: she was beautiful, with a rosy marble skin. He couldn’t help pitying the white race for allowing such pretty women to serve the dark and uncouth like him—or anyone else, for that matter.

‘Are you—’

Dev nodded.

She raced to the serving hatch. He liked that.

But a few minutes later, when he followed the others to the lounge, no one took note of him as they settled down to play cards, draughts or chess—or just talk

His office, a well lit centrally-heated wooden hut, stood apart from the grimy main building. The draughting machines on the office-floor looked like so many squares on a chess board with the pieces missing: that was at quarter to eight. By eight, the place was full. After assigning him to a draughting machine by a window, Dev’s group leader—a plumpish man with a bull-dog face—introduced him to the rest of the group of five. In the midst of white humanity

Dev felt like a raven in an ice-rink, but they did not stare at him or treat him differently. They were correct and courteous to him, and he to them. His job of estimating and draughting seemed easy enough: B.S.P. (British Standard Pipe threads), PSI (pounds per square inch) . . . the same terms and formulae as those in India.

During the lunch hour, the group leader took Dev to the canteen where, unable to think of a subject of common interest, he relayed the company statistics: 4,000 employees in Kempton, 300 draughtsmen in six different sections . . .

'The company has some subsidiaries too, doesn't it?' Dev asked.

'Yes, all over the Commonwealth and Europe. One in Cheverly. Right now, business is booming, so they're hiring draughtsmen by the dozen. Quite a few of your countrymen here,' he said looking at a corner of the canteen, 'but in other sections, not ours.'

Dev looked in the same direction, and saw them clustered together. Suddenly he realized that they had been staring at him ever since he entered the canteen. He fixed his gaze on his plate, repeating to himself, 'I'll stay away from the Indian colony. I'll stay away . . .'

'I must leave you now,' the group leader said, getting up. 'I don't like to keep my bridge partners waiting. If you go to the Town Hall they'll give you a free brochure on Kempton.'

The Town Hall, a Georgian structure with a clock tower, stood at the southern end of the High Street. Looking at the map in the brochure Dev saw that Kempton (population 45,608) was bounded by a river in the east, a belt of parks in the west, an industrial estate in the north and the works of Globe-Kem Company in the south. Walking down the High Street, Dev passed the Odeon Cinema, Barclays Bank, The White Hart, W. H. Smith, Woolworths, Currys . .

Days passed, lean cold days of winter. Dev longed for sunshine: it never came, or stayed much too briefly. Gradu-

ally he ceased to notice. His work was what really mattered; but it no longer consumed his nervous energy. He had begun to relax a little in the office. Once he even managed to tell a dirty joke to his colleagues with the skill of a music hall comedian. His side of the office shook with laughter. There they were: men of different cultures and colours wallowing in the profanity of a lewd joke, simultaneously reduced and elevated to the universal level of masculinity.

All day Dev felt exhilarated. After dinner, instead of withdrawing into a corner, he sat next to a man on a sofa in the hostel lounge. 'A nice day today,' he began.

'Yes,' the sombre face nodded slowly.

'It'll get foggy, though.'

'Yes.'

'It was a nice sweet-dish for dinner.'

'Yes.'

'Chess is a very brainy game.'

'Brainy? Yes.'

Never again, Dev resolved, getting up. Never again would he seek a niche for himself in hostel life. But his office was different. He had a place there—a stool, a draughting machine, a set of colleagues with whom he had to co-ordinate his work. The office for him was a nest, warm, neat, well defined.

A few days later he noticed a new draughtsman there, a good looking man nearing middle age, with a golden moustache, bushy eyebrows and grey transparent eyes glistening behind his thick rimmed glasses. At dinner time he was introduced as Neil Mahoney by the hostel manageress.

'I think I saw you in my section,' Neil Mahoney said, standing near Dev in the hostel lounge.

'Yes.'

'I knew a Hindu family once, in Dublin,' Neil said, and paused. Dev continued to stare at the fire. 'They were two brothers, Sharmas, from the Panjab, I think,' Neil resumed. 'They came to Dublin before the war and started from the bottom, peddling cheap hosiery, and built up slowly. Now I

hear they have a large import-export business with two cars and a large office. Perhaps you know them.'

Sensing a breach of the self-centred shell he had built around himself, Dev tensed. 'There are 400 million of us,' he began—but a sense of common decency made him look up and say: 'Won't you sit down?'

Neil told Dev of the medical college in Dublin and the vast number of foreign students it had, and about his job in Belfast with an aircraft company. 'After I had been laid off I could have lived on unemployment benefit and Union allowances, but the long idleness—no, not for me. But still, you know, I was wondering whether to accept this job. Then what do I see through a window?' he asked, and paused.

Dev looked at him with interest.

'A young Indian bending over a draughting machine. Not you, someone else. Well, I said to myself, an Indian had crossed oceans for a job; I only had to cross a channel. But I'm not sure, you know, if my wife and kids will like it here. Or, if I will. The pubs here are not as lively as in the Falls Road of Belfast. How do you find the pubs?'

'I haven't been to one yet.'

'No!'

The next moment they were both out in the street heading for the 'Coach and Horses'

'No, it's not true,' Neil said 'A month in England and never to a pub.'

'I come from a country of prohibition,' Dev tried to explain. 'Besides—'

'That's all the more reason to walk into the first pub you see. Start with a Guinness, the best drink of all, and from the oldest brewery in the world.'

'Guinness is good for you,' Dev smiled. He saw the brown liquid disappear into Neil's mouth as if it were a suction pump. His own drinking was slow: Neil's rapid-fire questions on India kept him talking most of the time. 'Why are you so keen on India?'

'Nehru is a good friend of DeValera,' Neil replied. 'We'll

drink to the health of Nehru,' he said, and ordered the next round.

Then it was DeValera's health. And Sean O'Kelly's. Dev could drink no more. But Neil kept on.

'Drink up,' Neil said to Dev. 'When the pub closes we'll cross the bridge and drink in another county.'

'No, no . . . I think . . . I'd . . .'

'You blokes going across?' a stranger enquired, thrusting his unshaven face between Neil and Dev. 'I have a car.'

Supported by Neil and the stranger Dev straggled to the car.

Next morning Dev woke with a hangover yet, oddly enough, he felt relaxed. For the past few weeks his mind had been receiving sensations that were novel, exciting, infuriating, depressing. But little, very little, had gone out of it. His thoughts and opinions had remained locked and he had, at times, felt smothered with their weight. And yet he had refused to take the easy way out, to walk into the receiving arms of fellow Indians who had often told him of the meetings and film shows arranged by the Raddington Indian Association. No, he would keep away from that. He would try some other channel for self-expression--letter writing for instance. He did so, but was soon disappointed.

He wrote to Mool Chand describing the first snowfall he had ever seen, and Mool Chand scrawled back advising him to take cod-liver oil and wear a lot of warm clothes. 'Use hat and don't run out of warm rooms into the cold outside . . . Beware of beef . . .'

Dev told his parents about life in Kempton: 'Here I have a furnished room to myself, whereas in Bombay I had to share a bare room with two others in a private hostel; here I have two eggs with bacon for breakfast instead of a piece of cake with tea as when in Bombay . . .' and they responded with a plea: 'Don't forget your poor parents who brought you into this world and reared you to be a man . . .'

Only Arjun Aswani was understanding and sympathetic: 'I'm sorry I could not return to Bombay in time to see you

off at the pier... I notice that you are finding English people difficult to mix with. Our neighbour D'Lima's son, Tony, has been in Kempton for some time. He married an English girl from Kempton and visited his parents last summer. As a Goanese Christian, he does not fall into the category of a "typical" Hindu Indian. Here is his address... You may find him interesting as a person (!?).'

That Tony's wife was English interested Dev. He wanted to meet her; she might enlighten him on the Kemptonian girls' attitudes toward dark foreigners like him. During his six weeks there, he had made little headway with them: just a smile or two from the odd office girl.

On Friday and Saturday evenings, he saw many young couples walking together, arms around waists, nibbling kisses like birds pecking at bread. He wished he had his arm around an English girl's waist and could kiss her in public. But first, he had to have a girl. Dance halls were the only source, and like most Indians, he did not know how to dance. In Cheverly he had followed up an ad for private dancing classes and gone to the studio. The door bell did not work; he turned the knob and entered. A reedy old man emerged from behind the curtains, shouting: 'I'm not prejudiced. It's the patrons; they start petering out. Once we had an Indian doctor...' Dev ran out, rage and bitterness choking his throat, his mind bubbling with abuse.

Dare he try a dance studio in Kempton? No. Or perhaps, Tony D'Lima knew the 'right' one.

Anthony Francis D'Lima was a big muscled man with raven black hair that waved slightly at the front. For a Goanese Christian, he was light complexioned: it was as if one expected to meet a Negro but met a mulatto instead. He welcomed Dev with an Indian warmth and led him to the lounge with light blue walls, cream coloured curtains, Swedish furniture and an electric wall-heater. A large expressionist picture of what seemed to be three Indian peasant women with water pots on their heads dominated the room.

'We haven't met before but you seem a little familiar,' Tony said. 'Weren't you once at the Poona Engineering College... for a competition? An inter-college elocution competition it was, I think.'

'Yes, I was. You do have a sharp memory.'

'No, it isn't memory. It's my hobby of profile-sketching. That's why I remember faces. I find English faces terribly nondescript.'

'Nondescript and cold.'

'Ice-cold. How about a cold beer?' Tony got up and brought beer and cigarettes on a tray. 'The first few weeks in a small town can be very trying. I remember my first days in Kempton. Quite lonely. But at least it was summer, or what passes for summer here.' His smirk dissolved in a draught of beer. 'My construction company in London thought I needed work-site experience. I couldn't refuse.'

'And found yourself in Kempton.'

'Quite. It was supposed to be three months, and I've been here thirty.' He paused. 'It wasn't really too bad for me, my first few weeks here. The Father invited me to tea right away. Other families followed. It was a curious thing for them, meeting an Indian Catholic I might as well have been a Martian.'

'Provincial ignorance,' Dev said, opening another bottle of beer

'More an islander's ignorance,' Tony remarked. 'But the sea has other effects. The humidity keeps the grass green all year round. There's some beautiful scenery in this country.'

'In the spring and summer, I suppose.'

'Yes. That's the time for travelling. Get a motor cycle or scooter: it's cheap to run and low on insurance. I had a Matchless and went dancing all around Kempton.'

'A lot of opportunity for courting and romancing in this country': Dev couldn't help blushing.

'Not as much as you may think in the first flush of your arrival. London, yes Lots of European girls, particularly German. They like Indians. I met my wife at the Palais.'

‘What did she think of Bombay?—and India?’

‘Better ask her that yourself. On Friday evenings she goes to the Raddington Tech to learn German. I go to the Tech myself.’

‘What for?’

‘To get the British stamp on what I already know.’

‘Seems to me that we must either submit to their notions or rot at the bottom.’

‘Or both.’ Tony rose to his feet and walked to a cabinet under the large painting. ‘Would you like to hear the latest Hindi film songs?’ he asked, sliding open the cabinet. ‘We bought the records in Bombay.’

‘That’s quite something you’ve got there!’

‘Yes. It’s all-in-one: tape recorder, TV set, record player, hi-fi radio and record cabinet. It’s a win from the football pools. We have a syndicate in our office . . .’

Tony had a large collection of records and Dev was feeling so much at home—hoping all along to meet Tony’s wife—that when he looked at his watch he feared he had missed the last bus.

‘I wish I had my station-wagon,’ Tony said. ‘My wife has taken it to the Tech, and then she’s helping her father at his restaurant.’

‘That’s all right,’ Dev said, rushing out.

As he reached the bus stop, running, he saw the tail lights of the bus disappear in the snow. Walking to the hostel he resolved to join the dance studio Tony had recommended, start saving for a scooter, prepare for a professional examination, and learn about Catholicism—from Neil.

Neil, however, was more interested in showing Dev the houses recommended by his estate-agent than in delving into Catholicism. They spent a whole day together tramping from one end of the town to another, never satisfied. Then, on Neil’s insistence, they went to the Raddington Y.M.C.A.

Neil was quite impressed with the documentaries on India and said so to the Secretary of the Indian Association who,

flushing with pride, fired yet another shot from the armoury of the Indian Ministry of Information: 'Over the past ten years literacy rate up 51 per cent, steel production up 125 per cent, bicycles up 1,280 per cent . . . country is now self-sufficient in dry batteries and sulphuric acid . . . already exporting table fans and galvanized iron buckets and plastic combs . . .'

'That's progress, now that the limeys have left,' Neil said aloud—well above the noise of forty-two Indians talking simultaneously to four bewildered English natives—and received a quizzical look from a white face that caught his words

Still talking and shouting Neil moved to the table with plates of Indian sweets and began gobbling them, a sight that spurred the diminutive Secretary to insist on writing down the recipes. With this piece of paper sticking out of his hands, Neil exchanged the Indian '*namaskar*' with the Secretary, and pledging himself to the cause of better Indo-Irish understanding left the hall.

In the lounge of the Shan Rock Club, overcome by its green atmosphere—the upholstery, the curtains, the waiters' uniforms—drinks and his impulse to better the Indo-Irish understanding, Neil told Dev in conspiratorial tones that in his youth he had had active connections with the Irish Republican Army. 'I wasn't in the ambushes and acts of sabotage, mind you, but in the messenger service. You know how important messengers are in such organizations.'

Dev nodded gravely.

'Once I got caught by the coppers. The Irish police used to put up a show for the limeys—catch a few now and then, and bring up a couple for trial. Politics. We were in the middle of a meeting when the coppers came, making a lot of noise. Of course, they let most of us run away, you know. I couldn't make it: my back was to the entrance door. Anyway, I was never charged. Someone pulled strings for me,' Neil said, smiling

Dev looked attentive. Neil finished his Guinness.

'It's nothing being arrested for the I.R.A. in the Irish Republic,' Neil went on. 'It's a badge of courage, you know. They stand you free drinks in the pubs and treat you like a little hero. The trouble comes—' his face grew ugly with anger—'the trouble comes when you're crossing over to Ulster or this country, and they check on you. Thank God, I had no record, otherwise I couldn't have made a living in Belfast. You know how the limeys are: all those dossiers in the Home Office. You'd know, coming from a British colony yourself.'

'Yes, I know. See this?' Dev said, pointing to the scar on his left cheek. 'A gift of the British Raj. It was the "Quit India" movement of '42. Well, not in '42—I was too young then—but on the 26th of January, 1945. On that day of the year, we nationalists used to read the Declaration of Independence in public—just a meeting and demonstration, peaceful. Slogan-shouting, nothing more.' He tapped his cigarette. 'Suddenly, no warning, nothing: a baton charge on the crowd, everyone running helter-skelter. Me there, a boy of twelve, absolutely dazed. The next thing, I feel a baton on my face: I shut my eyes, touch my face. Blood! Blood on my hand. I ran. I ran all the way home, without stopping or looking back—running and crying, and running faster. Was a terrible feeling, it was. Terrible!'

'The bloody British.'

'Funny, besides the scar the only other thing I remember about those times is the slogans we used to coin against the British.'

'Like?'

'Lathee golee khayange, magar azadee payange.'

'What does it mean?'

'We'll suffer batons and bullets, but will achieve independence.'

'You must teach me to say that in Hindustani.'

'If you agree to enlighten me on Catholicism.'

'Sure. You couldn't have asked a better Catholic. I've never missed a Mass in my life. Here I've begun reading

The Tablet every Saturday. I even volunteered for the laymen's church committee last Sunday, you know.'

During the next Mass Neil noticed an Indian in the church, and talked to him later. That afternoon he asked Dev, 'Do you know him?'

'Yes, if you're talking about Tony D'Lima.'

'I am. A strange name for an Indian, though.'

'Not for an Indian Catholic, no. After all the Portuguese brought Catholicism to India.'

Christian history led to the life of Christ and the fundamentals of Christianity, a subject on which Neil could easily become eloquent, the thick rims of his spectacles giving him an air of abstraction: 'Most evil comes from man's abuse of God's gifts. God has always inspired men to teach but when . . . He sent His son Jesus Christ . . .' To Dev's non-Christian ears these were strange words but he listened attentively and read all the pamphlets Neil gave him—'The Holy Communion', 'Confession', 'Peter and Eleven' . . .

Dev went to Mass with Neil once. A strange ragged music, the candles wavering, light shining in the flickering tablets, the white surpliced boys genuflecting, a white-and-gold robed priest, the people kneeling for bread and wine: Dev was moved by the solemnity and grace of the ritual. Only the bright light of the day outside the church could break the spell the ceremony held over him.

His earlier curiosity about Catholicism was changing into an active interest, with a stray thought of adopting it. He couldn't understand this. Religion had never appealed to him before. Perhaps because his own religion, Hinduism, was an mystic and vague. Catholicism seemed different: its approach was sophisticated, even intellectual at times.

One Sunday evening Neil was condemning sin and evil—'There's so much lying and cheating, and adultery around us. Disgusting. And in this country of Luther, easier to lose faith than a glove'—when the door bell rang.

Before Neil could resume talking, the manageress brought Willem DeBruin into the lounge. He was a lean middle-

aged man with a weather-beaten face and straight blond hair. Deep sad lines ran from the nostrils of his sharp nose to the corners of his thin lipped mouth. His speech was quick and nasal, his manner loud and extrovert: soon the walls of the lounge were echoing his voice.

The lounge of the 'Coach and Horses', however was much too large and crowded for Will's voice to ring out. 'There are plenty of your countrymen in the Persian Gulf,' Will said, looking at Dev.

'Plenty all over the world, right from Jakarta to Georgetown,' Dev replied. 'Too many at home, breeding like rabbits.'

'Or like Catholics,' snapped Will, breaking out in a chuckle. Neil stiffened, and threw Will a sharp look; Will's mouth froze into a half yawn. 'I forgot you were Irish,' Will said, his pale blue eyes focussed on Neil, apologetic.

'I've to leave, gentlemen,' Neil said, his voice vibrating with tension. 'Must not be late for the Church Committee—at least not when they're planning a grand bazaar and bingo for church renovation.' He buttoned his coat. 'For the rabbit Catholics,' he said slowly, staring at Will; and left.

Will and Dev drank together, Will talking, Dev listening. 'Mark my word. the Romans will take over the country,' Will kept saying 'It's all very simple: let all others plan their families while the Romans let nature work for them.'

Chapter Three

Strolling through the weekly market in High Street, Dev caught sight of Tony with books in one arm and a bookshelf in the other. 'Need some help?' Dev asked, tapping Tony's shoulder from the back.

'Thank you,' Tony replied, handing him the books.

'With all those books to keep, you'll certainly need the shelf.'

'Text books all,' Tony said, weaving his way through the knots of people. 'But for the library, I'd go bankrupt.'

'But a library wouldn't stock text books, would it?'

'It does. What's more, if they don't have a book, they'll buy it for you or borrow it from a neighbouring library.'

'Would you sponsor my membership?'

'What for? It's a free public library.'

'So is the Bombay Central library: they require references and a deposit.'

'Not here,' Tony said, opening the back of his station wagon. 'I'm sure they lose some books, but not many.'

'I go to their reading-room on the first floor so often but never thought of using their lending library.'

'Do they still get the *India News* there?'

'Yes. It's probably a free copy from the High Commission. I didn't see you at the Indian film show in Raddington.'

'Oh that—' Tony wavered for a while. 'After a few documentaries it all gets a bit boring. I've been expecting to see you at the Tech.'

'I'm too late for the term. I think I'll study at home—now that you've told me where to get the text books free.'

'Incidentally, is the dance studio all right?' Tony asked, lowering the window of his station wagon.

'Fine. Everybody's friendly.'

Dev went to the ground floor of the public library, became a member and borrowed a book on Production Engineering.

The next time, he was approaching the book stamping counter and was about to focus his eyes on a girl absorbed in a book resting on the counter when, suddenly, she raised her face: their eyes met. He blushed. She did not notice it. She began stamping his books. He noticed a mole below her lower lip, and an Urdu couplet—'For a mole on your cheek/My kingdom of Somarkand and Bokhara'—ran through his mind, reviving a memory of Zeenat, the only Pathan girl without a veil he had seen by chance in Multan. The girl across the counter looked so much like Zeenat: a long oval face, sad honey-brown eyes, a thin nose and thinner lips, and even the same hair style: strands of hair resting on her forehead. Had Zeenat grown to womanhood, discarded the veil altogether and travelled to England? He would ask the girl her name. Not now; next time.

But on his next visit, another girl stamped his books. He wanted to ask 'his girl' her name casually when she happened to be stamping his books, and to bring this about soon, he started to borrow a book every time he passed the library, but he was always disappointed. Once she stamped his book, and he was about to ask his question; but seeing a line of old matrons behind him, he changed his mind.

A few weeks later his chance came: he found the library deserted except for her in her book reading posture. He picked up a book at random and strode to the desk.

'You know you have an advantage over me,' he said in a rush. 'You can know my name by looking at my library card, but I have to ask you.'

'Miss Apple . . .' she replied, looking up.

Dev heard nothing but the beat of his heart. 'No, I mean your Christian name.'

'Pam.'

'Oh, the palm of my hand,' he said, opening his left hand, ready to leave.

'No, Pamela.'

She was not Zeenat. How sad! In any case, he must contrive to meet her. Perhaps, she went dancing at the Palais. He should try the Palais. He had learnt enough at the private dance studio.

'Dancing, drinking, dining: mix them together, and you have a perfect evening. 'There are some very sleazy night clubs in Baghdad,' Will said loudly, winking at Dev. He looked behind the bar of the 'White Hart' lounge, and tilting his head to avoid the 'RU18' sign on the cracked mirror, adjusted his tie. Neil was feeling grumpy, and so was Dev: their Saturday morning house hunting had been futile. 'You know, in the Persian Gulf...' Will resumed.

'The damned Persian Gulf again,' Neil murmured quietly. He looked around, spotted someone and waved at him. 'Excuse me,' he said, interrupting Will, 'I see a friend from Belfast.'

Will and Dev left the bar to sit in a corner but Dev's eyes followed Neil who, after seeing his Belfast friend leave, drifted to the bar where he engaged the barmaid in a mirthful conversation.

At the familiar call of 'Time, gentlemen,' Dev and Will pushed their way to the bar. Will pressed Neil by the shoulder and was about to speak when Neil turned his head slowly and threw Will a cold quizzical look: Will withdrew his hand. 'My luv... luv... ly... lady...' Neil slurred, pointing to the barmaid whose wrinkled age even the heavy layers of Max Factor could not conceal.

'Let's go,' Will said, pulling Dev by the arm.

They heard Neil shout 'Sweet dreams!' as they stepped out into the spring night.

'What do you think of that, eh?' Dev said slowly, bitterly.

'A man away from his wife needs entertaining, shoot his gun somewhere.'

'Not him. He's so damn religious. Spouts the Ten Commandments in his sleep.'

'There's always the three minute confession: "Father, I've sinned",' Will said, kneeling in the street. 'The instantaneous absolution of the Romans.' He gave his short scratchy laugh.

'How sad! To misuse something so noble as confession. All the double talk.' Dev gripped Will's hand to help him rise to his feet.

'That's the trouble everywhere: saying one thing, doing another. It's all over the world, all over the bloody world. And the more pious the man, the bigger the hypocrite—so keep away from pious men.'

'Let's run. I feel sick inside,' Dev said, and broke into a sprint.

In the hostel bathroom, Dev threw up. It was as if he had vomited the last trace of friendship with Neil. If Neil were single, it wouldn't have mattered; if he had shown just a formal attachment to his faith, Dev wouldn't have bothered; but Neil had posed as a devout Catholic who condemned 'sin' and 'evil' and adultery, and spouted the sanctity of the Catholic doctrine and pure life. Now Dev had seen him violating a commandment. He felt his interest in Catholic doctrine decline sharply. All religions and religious people were the same—hypocritical. He felt sick and lonely.

But only for a day. On Monday a new senior draughtsman, Bruce Stewart, was assigned to the empty draughting machine next to his. A sturdy man of forty, he laughed with a great deal of warmth, cocking his head backward, and closing his bulging grey eyes behind his gold-rimmed glasses. Within an hour his unpretentious joviality had filled his corner of the office like a strong perfume.

'I understand we'll be working on the same project,' he said to Dev, moving up his spectacles.

‘Good.’

‘What do you think of our moth eaten monarchy?’

Dev was stunned. He said nothing, just smiled—a thin shy smile. Not much, he wanted to say. But he was still feeling benumbed: a Britisher had taken him—a dark native of an ex-British colony—into his confidence and shared with him his innermost thoughts about the most sacred of British institutions.

They walked to the hostel together, sat next to each other at the dining-table, and went out drinking. In Bruce’s company, Dev became himself: relaxed and expressive. He laughed gaily as Bruce roled off joke after joke about the Blimps and bowler hats, monarchy and money bags, bosses and bishops. Not that Bruce confined himself to these subjects. He took in many more, always treating them with a touch of lightheartedness, until he heard the word ‘Depression’ in the smoke filled lounge once. ‘The Depression of the Thirties,’ he said grimly. ‘The Depression and death go together. That was when my old man died of pneumonia, because we hadn’t the money to fetch a doctor soon enough.’ Then he shut up and drank quietly. They walked to the hostel, subdued. A few days later he returned to the subject of the Depression and spent an evening talking of the wretchedness of a miner’s life in those days, swearing loudly his commitment to finish off the ‘Capitalist Sharks’. Dev admired his sense of commitment, and thought of him as a friend in more ways than one.

The overtures of Will and Neil, he shunned politely. He was finding Will’s garrulity irksome. He thought of Neil as a sham. And yet to the other hostel residents they were a ‘bunch of foreigners’ who did not go home *every* weekend and who went out drinking together.

Togetherness was what Will needed on his 38th birthday, (legally) separated as he was from his wife and twin children. Born in Rotterdam of a Dutch father and an English mother Willem Piet DeBruin had been ‘The Flying Dutchman’ in his Liverpool school, ‘A Tommy’ in the middle-east of the

Second World War, 'an oil technician' in Iran—and 'an indispensable employee' of the Suez Canal Company until he fainted in his office canteen with excruciating stomach pains, was operated on for his ulcer, and 'repatriated'. He had to watch his drinking, he had been warned.

'But not on my birthday, no,' he cried in the pub.

All evening they drank whiskey. It filled their bodies with a sense of well-being. Unwilling to interrupt their drinking they took a taxi to the hostel. Sipping from a whiskey bottle Neil struck up a happy tune on the piano in the lounge. They began singing, discordantly. Suddenly Will fell on a sofa groaning. They huddled around him, anxious, wondering if they should call a doctor. Will got up slowly brushing off their helping hands, went to the bathroom and returned, looking pale but relieved. 'The bloody Egyptian quack,' he mumbled, sitting down. 'What the hell do they know of surgery? The bloody Egyptian bastards.'

'Bloody, bloody,' Dev said, agitated. 'Why do you keep calling them bloody?'

'What else should I call them? Brothers? Brothers-in-arm? Bloody all the way from that dictator Nasser.'

'Dictator, my foot. You hate him because he kicked you out of his Suez Canal, and you lost a lot of money in the Stock Exchange.'

'He grabbed it, choking our national lifeline,' Will said, strangling an imaginary throat with his hands.

'Only after you had insulted him by withdrawing your offer of aid. Is it his fault that *your* lifeline is stuck out that far?'

'But why should we be showering green notes on any son-of-a-bitch who wants a dam or a trench in his two-acre land? If only the Socialists had stood up to that little dictator in Iran and refused to leave Abadan, we'd have been spared the Suez fiasco.'

'If only, if only,' Dev said with a bitter smile. 'The Egyptians and Iranians have as much right to nationalize

their oil and land as you have to nationalize coal, steel, railways—'

'Who likes nationalization in this country?' Will cut in. 'Look at the miners: absenteeism going up all the time.'

'Here's a man born and bred in coal dust,' Bruce said, pointing toward himself. 'I know the difference between A.N. and B.N.'

'What's A.N., B.N.?' Will enquired, irritated.

'After nationalization, before nationalization,' Bruce replied stressing every syllable. 'Anyway, I know how it feels to live with the daily dread of losing your job just because one fine morning the foreman may not like the look of you. If you really want to find out why a miner stays away from his work, I suggest you work in a pit for a day. You'll know. Anyway, a miner is paid by his output. If he misses work, he loses money.'

'I wonder how many draughtsmen would make a living if put on piecework,' said Neil.

'How do you explain the inefficiencies of the railways?' Will asked, and went on about how his late arrival by train had spoiled his chances of employment with an American company. 'The damned nationalized railways!'

'I was late for my interview in Glasgow because they had blocked traffic for Her Majesty's visit,' said Bruce, grinning.

'What else to expect in a country with too many vehicles on too few narrow lanes?' Dev said

'One more example of lack of planning in the capitalistic jungle,' Bruce said in a schoolmasterly voice.

'It's the survival of the fittest: let the most efficient win and prosper,' Will proclaimed.

'You mean let the big fish eat the small fish, the way we built the empire,' snapped Bruce, sliding up his glasses.

'That's the law of nature: let the strong rule over the weak,' said Will.

'It's the law when it suits you and a crime when it doesn't,' said Dev.

'For all the worst crimes we're supposed to have com-

mitted against your countrymen, why are they now flocking to our country now? What about you?' Neil asked, thrusting his nicotine stained finger at Dev.

'Because right now, your country is richer than ours,' Dev replied. 'It's richer because six hundred millions of dark humanity slaved for you for a century. And don't forget, you came to our rich land first.'

'For trading,' Will said.

'What were you trading in Ireland?' Neil asked.

'That's a different story,' Will answered, dismissing the question with a wave of his hand. He looked at Dev, and straining to smile said: 'But now you have a good job with us here.'

'Good job, my foot,' Dev flared, his scar reddened with anger. 'With a bloody degree from a university founded by the mighty British and job experience as a design engineer, I work as a trainee draughtsman. How magnanimous! But still, by Indian standards, the money—'

'The noise at this late hour . . .' The manageress's face appeared at the door, grumbling. 'I'm a working woman, no Saturday off for me.'

Shivering under the bedsheets, Dev wondered what had made him so bold and outspoken with an Englishman like Will. It must be the hard liquor he had had. Anyway, done is done, he consoled himself: it was as well. At last he had overcome the inhibition that had kept him subdued in the presence of the white natives. From now on he would speak his mind, drunk or sober.

Chapter Four

The days were longer now; and there were more people about, in the streets, parks and playgrounds. Everywhere flowers bloomed. Even the garden patch of the company hostel had come to life. Bruce had left the hostel to live with his family in an old flat by the river. Will was still there nursing the memory of his noisy argument with Dev—an experience which continued to bar an exchange of civilities between the two. Neil had not failed to notice this.

‘Your friend has a beautiful wife,’ Neil said to Dev when they were alone at the dining table one Sunday afternoon.

‘Where did you meet her?’ Dev couldn’t help asking.

‘They invited me to dinner last Sunday.’

‘Oh!’

‘She’s graceful. Nice legs!’ Neil smiled expansively.

Dev’s puritanic self shrank from discussing the anatomy of his friend’s wife. ‘I haven’t met her,’ he said in a scratchy voice.

‘You should. She’s well worth meeting,’ Neil said. ‘How about the Sham Rock this evening?’

‘I’d like it but my exam is near. Only six weeks to go.’

This was only one part of the explanation; the other part lay with his mother’s letter which said, ‘Your father has lost his clerk’s job as the Government has finally wound up the Ministry of Refugee Rehabilitation. He is trying his luck with other offices but jobs are hard to find. Yesterday I sold the last of my gold bangles . . .’ He had air-mailed £25 to his

parents and had decided to stop drinking, discontinue dancing lessons and save.

It was nothing new, this exercise in self-discipline. His life had been a series of such exercises. Besides, in this case, he had a notion that it would not last long, and that at the end he would be rewarded with something Neil would envy.

And envy was in Neil's eyes when a few weeks later, on a rainy evening, Dev arrived outside the hostel on his second-hand scooter and noticing Neil at the bus stop across the road, blew the tiny horn. Neil threw the butt of his Woodbine on the pavement and crushed it as if it were a deadly worm. Before Neil could recompose his hand in greeting, Dev was off!

Off to all the places that Tony had mentioned to him. He explored the countryside hoping to find some wilderness but never did. He found nature subdued, brought under formal control. It was such a contrast from the big and exposed landscape of India. On a sunny day he would lie on a patch of grass and, watching fragments of cloud in the soft blue sky, he would long for the company of a woman by his side. And, inevitably, his mind would gravitate toward the dances he had danced.

He went to dance halls well-dressed and well-groomed with a generous splash of after-shave lotion. Encouraged by his first visit to the Kempton Palais—when he had danced most of the evening—he had put his chances of winning an English girl's friendship at 20:1. But when he had had thirty unsuccessful dances he changed the odds to 50:1, and began visiting different dance halls on different days of the week.

Soon his total reached 70. Still no success.

His seventy-second attempt looked promising: his dancing partner, a very plain looking girl, accepted his suggestion for the next dance. He cheered. Dance over, she left him without a word. He was upset and withdrew to the gallery. Looking down he saw that girl standing hand in hand with a

small nondescript Englishman wearing a crumpled suit. Dev felt bitter.

But his bitterness did not last. On his next visit to the Palais he saw Pamela. They danced in a relaxed manner, conversing with the ease of two spinsters at a church social. He didn't ask her for the next dance. She might refuse. He couldn't risk that. He did not see her at the Palais again.

He had made 102 attempts, all unsuccessful.

Neil too had been hunting frantically—for a house. But finally when he found one suitable he looked, to Dev, more sad than relieved. Neil rather enjoyed his life at the hostel—living with men, drinking a lot and philandering a little, perhaps not so little because his wife had suddenly become anxious to join him. There was, of course, going to be the inevitable drinking to celebrate the occasion. This time Dev could not refuse Neil. Nor could Bruce.

Will was at first surprised to be invited, and hesitated. The coup d'état in Iraq had depressed the value of his oil company shares and left him in a predicament: should he sell out or wait? Remembering acidly his panic selling of the Suez Company shares after the Egyptian take-over he had phoned his stock broker in London for advice but had found him irritatingly non-committal. Drinking might clear his thinking, he finally told Neil, dispel his fears.

But it did not. With successive rounds of drink the threat of an impending loss of money swelled, and Will announced more vocally each time, 'We must help the oil companies, protect British interests.'

Bruce said that Sun Chariot had won the 3:30 at Redcar at 100/8; and Will countered with, 'We must not forget the British interests.'

Neil thought that the Ron Hopps show on television the night before was very lively; and Will said, 'We must protect the British interests.'

'That's the way you'd like it,' Dev snarled, 'A Tommy holding a bayonet while your capitalist digs the gold out of the land.'

'Listen Mr Verma,' Will said, pulling Dev by the sleeve, 'If I go to your country and start something that's profitable to both of us, why should you complain?'

'But Mr Do-Gooder, why are you in my country in the first place? Why don't you stay home and sell lollipops to the tots in your little shops?'

'Well—'

'Well this,' Dev cut in. 'You don't have a pennyworth of natural resources in your little island, just a bucketful of iron and shovelful of coal. That's why you sailed out to exploit other peoples'. For your own bloody good, not theirs.'

'Still stuck in the past with a thousand little chips on your skinny shoulder,' Will jeered, the straight sad lines on his face wavering. 'Why don't you wipe that froth off your face?'

'But the past is important,' Neil said with the gravity of a judge.

'Only to the Irishman. Because he's got his eyes fixed at the back of his head.'

'Never mind the past, wily Willie,' said Dev. 'These natives and the foreigners you mentioned. What, if a conflict arises between the two: if one man's meat becomes another man's poison? What then? Who should have the upper hand?'

A tense silence. Dev's eyes glistened; Neil and Bruce watched Will edgily.

Will kept still for a moment, then took a long gulp of beer, and, staring at the glass in his hand, finally mumbled, 'The natives.'

'Let's drink to the "dirty natives",' Dev shouted, jubilant. 'This round is on me.' He swivelled his head to catch a waiter's eye.

'*Ek, do, teen, char, panch . . .*' Dev heard Hindi numerals coming from a lean sallow face, a few tables away. 'Shit! Your countrymen can't even tell shit from food.'

'Why go so far?' Dev retorted. 'Just cross the Irish sea

and you won't be disappointed. But why do you go tramping around the world—'

'Why the hell not?' the lean man cried, and rose to his feet, clenching his fists.

'No, sir,' Dev cried back, getting up: 'You went there—'

SPLASH! Dev's face dripped with beer; his glasses went flying. Blinded but alert, he threw out his fists with a sudden energy, but struck no one. 'Did that son-of-a-bitch say the Irish?' he heard, as a fist hit his scar. He put his hand on his scalding cheek, feeling warm blood. Through his misty eyes he could see a mass of pink faced bodies swelling, getting nearer and nearer. He crouched and covered his head with his arms. Neil and Will were gone but Bruce rose to his feet, and standing behind Dev swung out his arms to ward off the gathering crowd. One of the youths behind Bruce grabbed him by the back of his collar and pulled, while two others caught his arms and pushed—Bruce fell on his haunches, toppling tables, chairs, bottles, glasses. The cloud of mob fury burst: blows, punches, and kicks rained on Dev, who groaning, crouched further, keeping his arms tight over his head, as more and more men moved, jumped and ran over the furniture, the rolling bottles and broken glass, to punish the loudmouthed Indian

A cry of 'Police! Police!' rose suddenly. The beating subsided as the crowd scattered and rushed for the doors. More cries of 'Police! Police!' from the barman. The group of youths still kicking Dev raced to a window, and pushing it open, escaped.

Helped by the barman, Dev sat down. While taking the hard blows of the mob, he had feared the worst: loss of an eye, a fractured skull or a broken bone, but now, in the silence of the deserted lounge, he felt nothing more than blood from his scar and bruises over his back, shoulders, arms and legs. His head had turned into a mould of lead and his ears had filled with a buzzing sound.

The barman was dressing his scar and Bruce was fumbling in a corner for his glasses when the police arrived.

In court Bruce pleaded 'Not guilty' before the magistrate, and went on to say in his most soothing voice: 'My friends and I were drinking in the pub and having a friendly argument. The argument became a little heated, but it was no business of a complete stranger to butt in, which he did. He shouted abuse at Mr Verma's countrymen. Mr Verma naturally defended his countrymen. For this he was beaten up, a shameful act . . .'

Dev Raj Verma came next.

Holding a copy of the Bible, the diminutive court clerk, wearing a rumpled suit with a red vest, droned through 'Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?' in one long breath.

For a few moments Dev said nothing. 'Sorry,' he mumbled finally, 'I have no use for the Bible.'

'Then you affirm,' the clerk said quickly.

Dev was disappointed: at this juncture he had visualized a buzzing consternation in the court room. 'No, I *do* want to swear.'

'But you refused the Bible.'

'Yes, because I'm not a Christian. I want a Hindu holy book.'

'Hindu holy book?' the clerk repeated, realizing Dev's presence for the first time. 'What's that?'

'Bhagavadgita.'

'How do you spell it?'

'B-h-a-g-a-v-a-d G-i-t-a,' Dev said slowly, looking more in the direction of the press reporter than the clerk.

The clerk took the slip of paper to the moon faced magistrate. After an exchange of grave whispers and nods, the magistrate announced: 'Case adjourned—for the court to get the Hindu holy book. Friday, two o'clock.'

'I thought you were irreligious,' Bruce said to Dev, as soon as they were outside the court-room. 'What's this Hindu holy book? A stunt?'

'You guessed it,' Dev replied, beaming. 'But what's a Hindu, anyway? Hinduism is more a way of life than a

formal religion: a combination of values, customs, and fasts. These I reject.'

'Yet you'll probably be called the most devout Hindu in all England. I can see the headlines now.'

A KEMPTON HINDU INSISTS ON HIS HOLY BOOK IN COURT

Yesterday, in the Kempton magistrate's court, an Indian national, Dev Raj Verma, of 78, Farm Road, Kempton, employed as a draughtsman with the Globe-Kem Company Ltd., refused to swear on the Bible. Instead, he insisted on using the *Bhagwada Gita*, the holy book of the Hindus.

The case, a charge of disorderly conduct in a public place, was adjourned for the court to obtain a copy of the holy book.

The legal authorities in and around Kempton claim that the incident is unprecedented in the annals of the courts of this county, and perhaps the whole country.

That was how the only evening paper of the area, *Raddington Daily News*, splashed the story on its front page, and carried the details on page 7. Under the heading of 'The Oldest Poetry Epic Of The World', the 'special correspondent' of the newspaper wrote: '... *Bhagvada-Gita* is a part of a larger volume of poetry called *Mahabhartas*. With its 100,000 stanzas written in 900 B.C., the epic is six times the length of Homer's *Odyssey*, and at least four hundred years older ...'

The 'special correspondent' turned out to be a serious looking curly haired young reporter who called on Dev a few days later, and after expressing the newspaper's interest in fostering international understanding asked Dev for biographical details. They chatted cordially until the reporter in the course of reiterating the newspaper's policy of exposing and combating racial prejudice—indeed, any prejudice—called England the last bastion of freedom and toler-

ance, adding solemnly: 'It can't happen here, the kind of things that go on in America. Terrible, there. Tell me, Mr Verma, do you recall any instances of a colour bar here? I don't think so. You see, all through our history...'

Should I or should I not?—Dev was debating in his mind. He could shut up the reporter by relating personal experiences of colour prejudice, he might even jolt some of the newspaper readers out of their smugness. What then? How would his colleagues at the office view his outbursts? And, more important, would it help or hinder his chance of transfer to another department (after passing the exams) which could only come through the recommendation of his present boss, Mr Whitfield? Hinder, most probably. He couldn't however, say there was no colour bar at all. 'Well,' Dev finally interrupted the reporter's monologue, 'it's like this—'

'I hate to leave now,' the reporter said, shooting a glance at his watch, 'but I must. I have another appointment in five minutes.'

The following Friday, Dev and Bruce were let off by the magistrate. A bandage on Dev's cheek aroused more sympathy than censure or anger. Dev noticed that in the owlsh eyes of the magistrate, and even in the distant looks of Will. Dev and Will avoided each other; and so did Dev and Neil. Dev thought of them with censure and disdain. And reading the write-up on him on the editorial page of the *Raddington Daily News* a few days later, he couldn't help fuming at the 'special correspondent' as well:

'Dev Raj Verma... an Indian citizen... an engineer in training with Globe-Kem Company Ltd.... The knowledge and experience he acquires in our modern and highly advanced chemical industry will prove invaluable to the development plans of his country... One more example of how private industry in modern Britain is helping the British ex-colonies in raising their living standards... laying the foundation for the New

British Commonwealth . . . Asked to comment on a recent misunderstanding that led to a violent quarrel in a pub, where he was drinking with his English friends, he said, 'Well, not openly!''

However, if Dev was looking for an opportunity to speak his mind it came in the form of an 'Express' letter from the Young Peoples' League (Y.P.L.) inviting him to address their 'emergency' meeting the following Saturday. A white people's organization treating him with such deference! He was flattered. But there was a snag: the title of the organization sounded Communistic. He hesitated; but only for a day.

They changed the 'meeting' to a half-day 'seminar' on Saturday afternoon. Dev arrived at the place of the seminar in Raddington—a small room where the Y.P.L. secretary lived shabbily—at quarter to three. At three o'clock sharp, there were three persons present: the acne faced secretary, a skinny young girl with a screeching voice and an obese young man with a small face. By half past three, the number had risen to five.

Further delay would have been 'decadent': that was how the secretary put it. He apologized for the thin attendance, but then, 'We must blame the warm weather today. Whites in general and the British in particular are as much deprived of sun as our Indian comrade here has been deprived of human warmth and justice in this country . . .'

Dev began with tongue in his scarred cheek. But not for long. After all, they had asked him to be frank, forthright. And carried away by his own oratory, he launched into an anti-British tirade when his eyes fell on the obese young man bending over a writing pad in his lap, taking notes. He stopped. He took a sip of water. When he resumed he talked slowly, cautiously. Vague fears were stirring in his mind: was this man an informer, an agent of the 'Home Office'? He had an informer's looks: thin slitty eyes, a small forehead, protruding ears. So the authorities were keeping track of him,

Dev conjectured with a mixture of delight and fear: delight at his importance, fear of adverse consequences. With time fear grew, delight dwindled. Dev stopped.

During the discussion that followed others outmatched him in spouting invectives, the 'informer' being the most vehement. It was as if they were imploring him and his country to take over England, and cure them of the 'decadence' and 'alienation' that had set in.

At long last the end came. Dev wanted to leave but they insisted on his drinking with them.

'Did you see *my* letter in yesterday's *Raddington Daily News*?' the secretary asked after a couple of drinks. Dev blinked. 'I wrote: how can we condemn the pagentry in West Africa when we have our own royal rituals? I was arguing with a reader who had condemned the West African way of life in his letter.'

'Silly rituals are not confined to England and West Africa,' Dev said somewhat sharply. 'We have a lot of them back home.'

'So you don't object to the royal ceremonies in this country?' The secretary looked surprised and hurt.

'I *do* object. But I'm against *all* silly ritual in *all* countries. I can't condemn British monarchical ceremonies and in the same breath condone African chiefs' rituals as the African 'way of life'. It's all or none. Most—' his subsequent words were drowned in a wail from the juke box in a corner.

It was the fear of getting into print with the Y.P.L. that made Dev buy the *Raddington Daily News* every afternoon, and check its every column. Nothing for three days, but on the fourth day spotting an inconspicuous headline of 'Y.P.L. Seminar' on an inside page, he read the thin print under it anxiously:

'Mr Dev Raj Verma was the main speaker at the seminar of the Young Peoples' League on the "Colour Bar In Britain" last Saturday. The speaker made many valuable suggestions to combat this "social problem".'

All evening and the next day Dev was jumpy. Any moment someone might comment on the news item. When he saw the office girl approaching him he feared that the department chief, Mr Whitfield, wanted to see him. She tried to sell him a raffle ticket. He bought two. But he could relax only after he had left for London for the August Bank holidays—a visit that had to be cut short because he was lured into a costly strip-tease joint in Soho.

Bruce was surprised to find Dev gazing idly at the W. H. Smith shop window on Sunday. 'You're back early,' he remarked.

'Yes, ran out of money,' Dev said. 'A whole night session costs a lot,' he added with a roguish smile.

'You should be careful,' Bruce said, opening the door of the nearest public bar. 'So many of the street walkers look young and clean but there's always the possibility . . .'

'I know. I had a whole box of Durex—' Dev coughed, and spilled his beer.

'A smart Indian. That's what your countrymen need, tons of Durex, their only way of breaking the cycle of poverty and overpopulation.'

'Will take time,' Dev said, nodding. 'How was your golf?'

'Not too bad,' Bruce replied, moving up his spectacles. 'Anyway, I met this big burly Englishman with a constipated accent—'

'I passed my exam.'

'A smart Indian!'

'Only if my application for transfer to the Production Planning department goes through.'

Dev submitted his application for transfer as soon as he returned to work. The next day he was in the department chief's office brimming with hope.

'We'll let you know when *we* see the need for transfer,' Mr Whitfield said, his grey temples bristling with displeasure.

'Since I passed an examination of the *British* Institution—'

'Yes, I see that, here,' Mr Whitfield said holding up Dev's

application. 'You inform the Personnel department about this. Meanwhile, concentrate on your present job.'

What's there to concentrate on in my dull routine work, Dev retorted quietly, very quietly.

While Dev was sulking over his failure in Kempton, Arjun was spreading the news of his success from Bombay: 'This scholarship I have won from a British oil refining company in Bombay will pay for my education in England for two years. They have left it to me to choose the courses as long as they are in the field of Industrial Management. I shall be flying to London in late September . . .'

COME ONE!

COME ALL!

THE ANNUAL GALA DANCE
OF
THE GLOBE-KEM COMPANY SPORTS CLUB

The Globe-Kem Company Sports Club is holding its 87th annual dance at the Palais-de-Dance, High Street, Kempton, on 29-9-58. The dance . . .

The notice struck a dormant note in Dev's mind: he wished he had a girlfriend to take to the dance. Would she come—Dev thought, the moment he saw Pamela at the Palais.

'You have become famous,' she said, her eyes lighting up.

'Depends on what one means by famous. I saw a quip in the *Reader's Digest* recently. It said: "Famous—a man who has appeared on T.V. twice".'

'That's for the Americans. There were plenty of them in Spain.'

'Why Spain?'

'Because I just had my holidays there: gorgeous sunshine, and dancing in the open.' She closed her eyes, reminiscing.

'Dancing'—Dev began loudly, but shut up. Why bother? He'd only end up adding another rejection to his 148. Or maybe, he should approach her—but obscurely, mock-seriously: 'Perhaps, the lady-companion of the evening

would honour this gentleman with her gracious company on the occasion of the dance of the Globe-Kem Sports Club?’

‘My dear sir,’ she said curtsying, ‘the lady has the pleasure of accepting the invitation so sincerely extended if the kind sir would let her know the date, the day . . .’

At last a success, a girl to be with, a mate who would complete the pattern: Tony and Monica, Dev and Pam. Yes, they would be delighted to come to the dance, Tony told him. Dev felt energy and warmth welling up in him from what source he did not know; nor did he care. There was now a sun within him that never set even though outside, in the sky of Kempton, the sun was becoming rarer. Summer had left suddenly. But the autumn had not taken over. Not yet.

Back in Bombay, September could be hotter than August: it marked the end of the monsoon. Dev was reminded of this, dramatically, by a cable from home: ‘Mool Chand died of sunstroke’

Dev liked Mool Chand despite his overbearing manner and conservative views. There was an air of dignity and distance about Mool Chand which made even clichés—‘Time and distance are great healers’, ‘Don’t let the emotion of the moment get the better of you’—sound wise and important when they came from him. Dev picked up his last letter and began reading:

‘Be careful not to entangle yourself with the mighty British Empire. Remember the scar on your cheek. The British nation is powerful, and who are you, a small Indian, before it? Like a fly before an elephant. So be careful. Don’t get mixed up with politics again . . .’

Chapter Five

On his way from the airport to the Anglo-Asian Hostel in Rangoon Street, London, Arjun Aswani could think of nothing but a bath: he was quite determined not to let life abroad disturb his routine of a daily bath.

In the hostel bathroom he found a bathtub and a shower. To wash himself in his own dirt in a bathtub—he dismissed the idea with disgust, and walked to the shower at the far end. He tied a napkin around his waist, pulled the plastic curtain, and standing under the shower turned the valve.

The shower hissed; then a sudden burst of water---and THUD! the fixture fell on his head. He sat down on his haunches and held his head between his knees to recover. Water drops bouncing off the floor bothered him, and he got up to shut off the valve and put the fixture back. Nothing doing. The rusty fixture wouldn't hold to the stem. Now that he *had* to use the bath, he looked around for a mug or a glass, but found neither. He dashed to his room, the napkin around his waist, and returned with a glass.

Squatting next to the water-filled tub, he filled his glass, and poured it over his back. He had just soaped his face when he heard angry knocks on the door. He rinsed his face hurriedly, and standing behind the door opened it a little. He was about to peer out when a fat woman pushed the door open and rushing in, shouted: 'Blimey! No wonder, it's rainin' in the bathroom downstairs.'

Shivering with cold and unable to see properly without his glasses, one hand on the door-handle, the other resting

against the wall, Arjun looked sheepish—and confused. His napkin fell. 'That's big,' he heard, as he stooped swiftly to pick up the napkin, wondering: what was big? his p——?

'That's a big hole,' the woman said, turning her eyes away from him as he raised his head, his hands still fumbling with the napkin to hide his genitals.

The woman mopped the floor while Arjun tied the ends of the napkin in one tight knot after another.

'Now don't go around drownin' the place,' she said, half-jokingly, and left the bathroom, sighing.

Arjun bolted the door, and stepped into the bathtub with his napkin on, but did not lie down. Squatting in the empty tub he filled glass after glass from the tap and finished his bath, the slow hygienic way.

He felt clean and tired and went to bed still wondering if the charwoman had seen his male appendage. What a start! To be seen stark naked by an Englishwoman on his first day in England! He knew of the boldness of the Englishwomen but this . . .

The sun peeped through gaps in the curtains of his room and woke him, but it was too early to leave bed on a Sunday morning. He got up a few hours later and after lunch, armed with a camera, left for Hyde Park.

At first he thought he was viewing a movie-set. What else could explain rows of semi-nude women lying on the grass? It was only after he had roamed the park for an hour without once coming across a movie camera or a crane that he attributed the scene to the British way of 'greeting the sun'. He was using his own camera freely, pretending to be photographing flowers or trees or insects but in fact, taking in the scantily clad women in a general—rather than particular—sense. Didn't that young woman rubbing oil on her shoulders smile at him? Should he smile back? Better not. He had heard so many stories in Bombay of men getting hooked up by English tarts. He must stay away from them.

Speakers' Corner was different: he could photograph anyone without a qualm, they were all fully dressed. He was

focussing on a bearded speaker licking an ice cream cone, when he heard 'Have you a light, please?' in a Hollywoodish accent. He removed the camera from before his glasses, and saw an eager white face.

'No, I don't smoke,' he replied stiffly.

The girl tossed her head and walked away. He liked the way she swung her hips under her skin-tight shorts, and felt a pang of regret for having turned her away. 'Let me see,' he should have said, and begun searching his pockets or approaching someone else for her; or he should have asked her: 'Are you an American? Your accent'—or 'Would you like a cup of *Indian* tea?' Well, she was gone. So much the better. It was best not to get entangled with women: his studies would suffer. But a few minutes later when he saw the same girl walking hand in hand with a man wearing a fez his regrets returned. He snapped a picture of her.

He was soon left with only two unexposed negatives in his camera. Tramping around the Imperial College, his prospective Alma Mater, he tried to find a vantage point from where to take in its overall structure. He failed to find one. The College sprawled over a large area. Glum and tired, Arjun took pictures of the Queen's Tower and the gaslights outside the Royal College of Science hoping to impress his parents with their antiquity and awesomeness.

A few days later the serious business of studies began. During the interview the professor of Management Science told him matter-of-factly, 'You are more suited for the diploma course than the post-graduate degree.'

For a few stupefying seconds Arjun could not talk. Then he tried, 'I think . . . I feel.' He cleared his throat. 'I feel I can finish the degree course in a year.'

'You see,' the lantern jawed professor said, reclining in his swivel chair, 'only mature men with experience in industry are to be admitted to post-graduate courses.'

'But I have experience in industry.'

'It amounts to treating you as an honours graduate with

industrial experience,' the professor shook his head with a stiff smile of disbelief.

'It was a tough job winning that scholarship in India. There were scores of topnotch applicants. My academic record is outstanding: distinction marks throughout. I won two gold medals in the final year.'

'Do you *really* believe the standards of Indian universities are the same as ours? Or that they are the same now as when we ran the country?'

'I don't know. I wasn't old enough then to be in a university.'

The professor cleaned his glasses, put them on, and browsed through Arjun's papers on the desk, grunting. 'All right,' he said, looking up at Arjun, 'I'll put your case before the head of the department. Let him decide. He's out of town but will be back on Friday. The earliest he can see you is on Monday.'

'Thank you,' Arjun said, rising to his feet.

What was the use of winning a scholarship and travelling six thousand miles if one were made to study something one already knew, and at the end be given a high-sounding, but worthless, diploma. When they had admitted him to the post-graduate course of studies, he would show them—the lantern jawed professor and his ilk—what a first class Indian intellect could do. But it was more a question of 'if' than 'when'.

Back in his room, he read passages from the *Sukhmani*. Then he went down to the lounge, and after a cursory glance at *The Times of India* looked at the notice-board. Nothing interesting. But wait. That leaflet in a corner—'A service in honour of our Guru . . . on Wednesday, at the Sikh Gurdwara, Northend'—just the thing to soothe his agitated mind.

A sign post at the Northend tube station pointed the way to the Gurdwara which stood, inconspicuous, in the shadow of a large block of flats near the station. It was a one storey building with Gurmukhi words inscribed on the yellow wall-face. Arjun took off his shoes, covered his head with a hand-

kerchief and joined the congregation in a hall where men and women sat separately on a white tarpaulin. Most of the men were bearded Sikhs, the few without beards or turbans were most probably clean shaven Sikhs or Hindus from Sind like himself. The service had already begun and the priest, sitting on a low stool behind a massive copy of the *Granth*, the Holy Book, draped in bright scarves, was reading aloud while a Sikh boy waved a fly-switch over him. Periodically a Sikh at the harmonium sitting next to the priest broke into song. It was very much like a service back home. Dominating the wall behind the priest was a large picture of Guru Gobind Singh riding a stallion with a white falcon on his hand against a background of lush green trees, blue waterfall, and colourful birds. Gazing at the picture Arjun felt a sense of tranquility that even the children's cries from the women's section couldn't disturb.

Presently the congregation rose, folding hands. The priest repeated the names of the ten Gurus, the Sikh martyrs and shrines, invoking their blessings: at the end of each supplication, he was joined by loud '*Wah Gurus*' from the congregation. Finally, the priest cried, '*Wah Guru jee ka Khalsa, Wah Guru jee kee fateh: Jo bole, so nihali*!' and all present shouted, '*Sat Sri Akal*,' and went down on their knees in the direction of the Holy Book. Arjun felt uplifted. He ate the *prasad*—a fried mixture of flour, butter and sugar—with relish. Then he walked to the Holy Book and bowed before it again, touching the tarpaulin with his forehead, and put two half-crowns in the collection box.

He found the priest standing in a corner combing his long black beard with his fingers. Going to him, Arjun said: 'How much for the *Akhand Path*, Sardarjee?'

The priest replied in Punjabi, which Arjun did not understand. A Sikh, with a sheathed dagger hanging from a strap across his chest, stepped between them as Arjun repeated, 'How much for the *Akhand Path*?'

The Sikh with a dagger translated Arjun to the priest, who said something. 'I'm the treasurer of the Sikh Associa-

tion,' the Sikh with the dagger said, extending his hand to meet Arjun's. 'How do you want the *Akhand Path*, with or without *prasad*?'

'I really want it non stop, right away, because, you see, next Monday I have a crucial interview. That's why.'

'But we require at least a week's notice.'

'How much would it cost?'

'With or without *prasad*?'

'Quote me both.'

'Twenty pounds for the reading of the Holy Book, genuine non stop three full days and nights; eight pounds extra if you don't give us a week's notice. Eighteen pounds for the final feast, but no daily *prasad*. That'll cost you another six pounds.'

Arjun almost fell with the shock. That was more than £50 (about 650 rupees), twice his monthly allowance. Back home it didn't cost more than a hundred rupees. 'I'll think about it'—is all he could say. 'How much for the "Word" from the *Granth*?'

'That's a pound. When do you want it?'

'Now.'

'Better wait till the crowd clears. Let me get you a cup of tea.'

Fifteen minutes later the priest opened the *Granth* at random and read the first verse that caught his eye:

'It is as a king asleep on the royal couch
Dreams he is a beggar, and grieves;
Or as a rope mistaken for a serpent causes panic,
Such are delusion and fear.'

Nothing to worry then, you 'king asleep', Arjun told himself.

On the day of the interview he rose early, had a bath, read passages from the Sikh *Sukhmani* and Hindu *Bhagvada Gita*, and left his room with all his testimonials and certificates tucked neatly in his brief case.

His interview ended in a compromise: he was admitted to the post-graduate courses, but on a two-year basis, not one.

Dev couldn't help peering over Pamela's shoulder as he helped her off with her coat at the 'Golden Bamboo', and saw her wearing a low cut black dress.

'I never thought the palm of a hand could be that beautiful,' he said, gazing at the brooch that lay snugly at the parting line of her breasts.

'You and your word-game,' she said, flattered.

A dapper Chinese waiter appeared with dragon-sized menus and was about to flash a smile when Dev told him, 'We're waiting for friends.'

Dev wondered where he had picked up such 'gentlemanly' manners as opening the door for a 'lady', helping her with her coat, moving a chair for her and speaking to the waiter with assurance and urbanity. Where? From Hollywood movies, where else? These were the peepholes through which he had seen life in the West and found it rich, materially and sensually. He had been attracted by the promise of affluence and sensual adventure it held for him. And so he had come to England, the only Western country open to young Indians like him. Now he was part of that life. Or was he? He was just taking the first fumbling step into it, having an English girl out to dinner and dance . . .

'How old are you, Dev?' he heard from across the table.

'Around the quarter-century mark,' he replied. 'I feel tempted to ask the same question.'

'Well, that's a woman's secret.'

'Yes. As they say: when it's a man's birthday he takes a day off; when it's a woman's, she takes a year off.'

She gave an odd grunt of a laugh: it was a contrast from her velvet smile. 'My friend is in India,' she said suddenly.

'Boy or girl?'

'Well, an ex-boyfriend. His name is John Tomlinson.'

'I see: an instance of population exchange.'

She knit her forehead, pondered over his words, and

smiled. 'He's gone there on a two-and-a-half year contract, to Calcutta.'

'Which means I can't stay a day longer than that.'

'Do you ever talk seriously?' she asked with an air of mock-irritation.

'It's my grandfather in me. He used to say: it's an art to be funny in a serious way, and serious in a funny way.'

'The poverty in Calcutta wouldn't let you be funny in any way. It's appalling, John says: the sight of people eating and sleeping in streets.'

'The highest standards of poverty.'

'It's pretty warm there, he says. He has lost a stone since he got there six months ago.'

'And I've gained about that much in this country.'

'You mean you were thinner then, than you're now? You must have been a rake.'

'Not by Indian standards,' he said. 'As for your friend in Calcutta, responsibilities of office may be wearing him out.'

'I think they are. He's just your age. When he first arrived in Calcutta, he hadn't a clue what his firm expected of him. Well, by now he has found his bearings in his office. And outside too. A few weeks ago he joined a sports car club.'

'I bought a second-hand scooter last June.'

'Yes,' she said absent-mindedly. 'In his last letter he sounded important. He'd be inclined to sign a new contract with them, he says, if they consented to make him General Manager of the whole division.'

'My request for a lateral transfer was turned down.' Dev lit a cigarette; she refused one. 'Big words those: inclined to sign, if they consented to,' he said, somewhat bitterly. 'What did he work as, here?'

'A draughtsman with a shipbuilding firm,' she replied matter-of-factly.

'Quite a jump! From a draughtsman to General Manager in a few months. Is it "Lady Luck" or "Madam Merit"?' Surprised and confused by the bitterness of his tone she began patting her freshly curled hair nervously. He noticed

her predicament, and throwing a glance at his watch said, 'Eight-twenty, and they aren't here yet.'

'Well, I think I'll look at the menu if you don't mind,' she said. 'It's so long, and elegant, with gold letters.'

Dev always had a suspicion that such 'experts' as Polson, Olson, Jergson, Jameson . . . at the Erikssons Ltd. in Bombay were probably no more than welders, painters, mechanics or draughtsmen in their own countries. Now he knew.

'Sorry to be so late,' Tony said, a little breathless. 'At the last moment we couldn't find the keys. Meet my wife, Monica.'

Monica smiled excessively as she shook hands, upturning the nostrils of her nose and revealing a few hairs on its partition. 'It's ever so frustrating not to find the keys just when you're all ready to leave,' she said, and sat down, her feet barely touching the floor in spite of her high heels.

Like two female Kemptonians meeting in a metropolis, Pamela and Monica began asking each other where they lived, what their fathers did (Pamela's father worked in a machine shop, Monica's owned a restaurant), which school they went to and which hairdresser . . . while Tony and Dev studied the menu to find an easily pronounceable course.

By the time they were through with dinner and drinks, the Palais was so crowded they literally had to worm their way through the hall to the gallery.

'Hello, Bruce, I thought you didn't like dancing,' Dev said. He was glad to see Bruce sipping tea near the bar.

'I hate it, but my wife—she needed a little change. What with kids and house work, she never gets the chance to go out.'

'Where is she?'

'Dancing, down there. We met this bloke from Edinburgh—'

'Meet my friends,' Dev started to say, when a voice crackled over a loudspeaker: 'Will the holder of ticket number seven hundred and sixty seven please come forward.'

Number seven, six, seven.' All at once three hundred and twenty hands were digging into pockets and handbags.

'Seven, six, seven,' the band leader repeated.

A sturdy man strode to the platform, ticket in hand.

'A bottle of sherry, ladies and gentlemen,' the band leader announced. The band struck a chord. 'Give him a big hand.' The crowd clapped limply.

'Thank you,' the sturdy man said, taking the bottle.

'Sorry, friend, you can't drink it here. Past the time.'

'I'll just sniff it then.'

The crowd laughed.

'Come here, Neil,' Bruce shouted, leaning against the banister of the gallery. Neil looked up, surprised, and headed for the gallery through the dancing couples.

'Where is your wife?' Bruce asked Neil the moment he was within talking distance.

'In the ladies,' Neil replied. He sat down and took a swig from the bottle.

Then he handed the bottle to Bruce, who took a sip. Dev grabbed the bottle from him, took a gulp and passed it on to Monica. She hesitated.

'Come on, it's fun,' Tony said.

Monica brought the bottle to her lips: a camera bulb flashed. 'No, no!' she yelled, jerking the bottle away from her lips.

'Blackmail, taking a picture like that,' Neil said aloud, rising to his feet to get the bottle, but Tony beat him to it. Neil bowed, said, 'May I?' and escorted Monica to the dance floor.

'Your turn,' Tony said, holding the bottle before Pamela.

'Certainly,' Pamela croaked, and grasped the bottle by its neck. Still standing, she tried to sip, only to spill most of it. Dev jumped to his feet and, handkerchief in hand, pressed her bosom, pretending to be taking the stains off her dress. 'Excuse me,' she said, stepping back. 'I have to use the ladies.'

Dev took the bottle from Tony's hand and was about to take a mouthful, when Bruce said indulgently, 'Don't mix

your drinks; leave it for others.' Dev tilted the bottle into his mouth.

'That trouble with your windows,' Dev said, leaning toward Bruce, 'he can fix it. Civil engineer, civil he is. Builders Limited.'

'Builders Limited,' Bruce said, shaking Tony's hand. They sat down. Dev held his aching head in his hands, elbows on the table. 'You know anything about the north-east development plan they have?'

'Do I?' Tony said. 'I started with it in their London office.'

'How do I get on to a semi-detached?'

'Not a chance. They're booked solid.'

'There,' Bruce said, tapping Dev on the shoulder, 'your girl is coming back.'

'Hm . . .' Dev managed to open his eyes. 'Oh, my Zeenat,' he murmured, and putting his arm round her waist, went off to the dance floor.

'More sherry?' Bruce asked.

'No, thanks,' Tony replied. 'I have to drive. You interested in buying a house?'

'Interested? I'm eager, anxious.'

'You a friend of Dev?'

'Like this,' Bruce said, clasping his hands.

'I'll do this. It isn't strictly ethical, but I'll do it for you, being a friend of Dev's.' He lowered his head and said softly: 'If someone cancels out, I'll phone you.'

'Thank you, that's very nice of you. My flat near the river is old, but that's not the trouble, really. I'm used to living in old places. It's the river, it smells foul.'

'What about the windows Dev mentioned?'

'Not the windows. Dev said it wrong; he gets drunk too soon. You hold it well.'

'Quite. Brought up on it, we Indian Christians.'

'You must be. Anyway, it's the kitchen. There's no way for the kitchen smells to get out. And we're afraid to open the windows because they face the stinking river.'

'I know what you need—an exhaust system. Tell the landlord.'

'Tell Shylock.'

'I can help you with a design, if I see the kitchen layout.'

'You are welcome, anytime,' said Bruce. 'Ah, here comes my wife. Hello, luv, I want you to meet a friend of Dev's. He's going to help us with the kitchen.'

'Is he, really?' Bruce's wife said, shaking Tony's hand. 'How nice of you—there, isn't he the man who won the prize?' she asked, catching sight of a couple approaching their table. 'He's got a very young wife.'

'She's mine,' Tony protested loudly.

'I'm sorry,' Bruce's wife said.

When Dev returned to the gallery with Pamela he found the three couples—Bruce, Neil and Tony and their wives—gathered around a large table.

'Who wants coffee?' Dev shouted. All of them raised their hands. 'And tea?' All of them raised their hands again. 'Can't have both.'

'Woooo!' they cried in unison

'All right, fifty-fifty,' he said, and went off to the bar.

He had just placed the order when he felt a hand tapping his shoulder. It was Neil.

'May I have a word with you?' Neil asked gently.

Dev hesitated. 'All right, if it won't take long.'

'No, it won't. I'll come straight to the point,' Neil said, sober and serious. They moved to a corner. 'I know how you feel about that evening in the pub. I don't blame you. But, you know, *I* made that phone call to the police,' Neil said in that hushed tone in which he had announced his connection with the I.R.A.

Dev stood silent: it unnerved Neil.

'When I had finished the call, Will practically dragged me away,' Neil went on. 'He wanted a drink badly and a pal to go with him. You remember his dark mood that evening.'

Dev gave an abstract nod: it reassured Neil.

'He got so tight that night I had to put him in a taxi and

then carry him to his room,' Neil continued. 'That's the truth.'

Dev looked at him with a faint smile: it encouraged Neil.

'Besides, the fact is,' Neil added, awkwardly, 'my wife goes into hysterics every time I get involved in a brawl, you know, anything that draws the police.'

'That's all right,' Dev said, giving a nod of understanding. 'I don't blame you.'

'That's how it is in marriage: you can't lead your life your own way. You'll see when you get married.'

'Your coffee's ready,' cried the woman at the bar.

When the dance was ending Tony offered Dev a lift home but Dev declined it, saying, 'Thanks but our tickets include bus fares.' This was true. But what was more true was that Dev wanted to emerge from the Palais holding an English girl's hand.

But, actually, more than that happened. Dev took Pamela home. They walked hand in hand through the quiet cobblestone streets, never silent, sharing a cigarette. And just as she was about to climb the doorsteps of her home he caught her in his arms and kissed her hard and long, the way he had seen it done in Hollywood movies. As she closed the door behind her, the shadow of a leafy branch on it swayed wildly with the breeze. Pamela was the breeze that had made Dev's heart swing.

Dev was feeling the first stirrings of a 'romantic love': the experience was new to him. Women he had had, sexually, in Bombay, but there was no love in it, no feeling; it was an act, a physiological purging. This morning he was full of feeling, a longing surging through his narrow chest. He relished it. He relished the moment of kissing Pamela. He ran the whole scene in his mind again and again as he sat, vacant eyed, before his draughting machine.

'Mr Whitfield wants to see you,' the office girl told him.

His trance broken, Dev rose swiftly.

Whitfield gave him a tight lipped smile and an expansive account of how the company had failed to win new contracts.

'It's the very nature of our business,' he went on. 'Feast or fast. After the recent boom we have to tighten our belts. So you can see why some draughtsmen have to be laid off. You understand, don't you?' His face showed concern. 'It's no reflection on you or your work. Indeed we have been pleased with your performance.'

Dev was seized with an oppressive feeling of shock: his eyes turned hard, his knees quivered under the desk. He felt pain and self-pity as he thought of going away from Pamela. But that wouldn't happen if he found another job in the Kempton area. That was a big IF, though. And what about the time in between jobs? How would he support himself, and keep up payments on his scooter as well? Only last week he had sent a large sum home; his father was still unemployed; and he had bought a new suit and a pair of shoes before the dance. But then the company had to give him a month's notice. Done is done, he managed to tell himself. He might as well treat life as one long experience, as his stoic grandfather had often advised him to.

'That's all right,' Dev said, smiling wanly. 'Someone had to tell me the bad news, and it had to be you. But then you were the one to hire me, in this very office. I'll find something.'

'I'm surprised to see you take this so calmly after the reactions I had from your compatriots,' Whitfield said, relieved. He offered Dev a cigarette and lit his own. 'One of them almost collapsed in that chair. Another went out in tears. But we couldn't help it. The union left us with no choice.' He took a long pull at his cigarette

'The Technicians' Union?'

'Yes,' he said gravely, in a whisper. 'Please don't repeat this to anyone, but it's the union's doing. When we told them some of the draughtsmen had to go they said, "The coloured man goes first no matter what his length of service." We didn't like it. Because, to be honest, most of you are better workers than—' The phone rang. Whitfield seized it.

Dev withdrew after a nod from Whitfield.

To Dev's way of thinking, losing a job was as dreadful as discovering that one had T.B. or V.D. or cancer. Now that he had been sacked the least he could do was to hide the fact from others—except Bruce.

'I had a hunch about it,' Bruce said, sliding up his spectacles, in the public bar of the 'Coach and Horses'. 'But it has happened much too soon. The union meeting was only three days ago. And this wasn't even on the agenda.'

'How was it raised then?'

'Under the last item: any other business. The secretary brought it up.'

'Were there many at the meeting?'

'Twenty. The blokes would much rather watch the telly.'

'I'm surprised the meeting did not disperse due to the lack of quorum.'

'The quorum is nineteen or ten per cent of the branch membership, which ever is less.'

'Which ever is less,' Dev repeated. 'You think the union's National Executive will let this go?'

'They wouldn't, if they knew about it, that is.'

'Why if?'

'I'm sure the secretary knows the national policy on colour. I'm also sure he wants no trouble with the National Executive. So.'

'So?'

'He'd make sure nothing appears on paper. Do everything orally.'

'Oh, that way,' Dev's voice fell. 'I thought Englishmen played fair.' He looked around aimlessly, then said, 'What do *we* do? Shall we too avoid trouble, and let this go?'

'There's nothing we can do, for the time being—anyway,' Bruce replied slowly, apologetically. 'Everything depends on the minutes of the meeting, that is if this thing appears in the minutes. And minutes are always presented at the following meeting. That's a month from now.'

'What about a special meeting?'

'Who will collect that many signatures?'

'You.'

'I'm new here,' Bruce explained. 'Besides, no one is really interested in union meetings nowadays. Their bellies are too full with pot roast, and their minds with telly. And a special union meeting to uphold the brotherhood of man, well—'

'So that's that,' Dev said with an edge of sarcasm. He felt a wave of anger rising in him; only he did not know who or what to be angry at, and how. That made his anger all the more oppressive. 'White workers of the world, unite!' he jeered, raising his glass. 'White workers of the world unite. To be hired first and fired last is your right.'

In one long gulp Bruce finished his drink. 'How did Pamela take this?' he asked.

'She doesn't know. I'm seeing her tomorrow.'

'Will you tell her?'

'I hope there'll be no need. I might find a job around here.'

'I doubt it. Business is slack all around.'

There was a frown on the skin of his mind which he did his best to hide from Pamela. In the musty theatre of Kempton he laughed merrily at the punch lines delivered by a travelling company playing a 'family comedy'. Or so he thought. But Pamela must have noticed the hollowness of his laughter for, outside, in the street, she hastened to knit her hand into his, going where he went, unquestioning, docile.

They found themselves drifting vaguely towards the river. It was quiet. They could hear the clock tower chime. Eleven.

'I like rivers,' she said lazily. 'but not this one.'

'Yes.'

They stood leaning their elbows on the dark stone parapet, their shoulders touching, and yet a wide gap stood between them like a ghost.

'Is something the matter?' she asked. 'You've been so quiet all evening.'

'My grandfather died.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' she said, and placed her gloved hand on his. 'I really am. How old was he?'

'Seventy-one, but vigorous.'

'Do you miss him?'

'Not as much as I do you.'

'You lie,' she said indulgently.

'In good cause.'

'I never know whether to take you seriously or not, or when,' she said moving her hand away slowly.

'Nor do I,' he whispered, and ran a finger gently down the line of her jawbone and kissed her. 'You have a lovely profile.'

'So do you,' she said, returning his kiss.

'I hadn't noticed. Men don't really look at themselves in a mirror the way women do.'

'John did. Quite a lot, as a matter of fact.'

John again, Dev cursed under his breath. 'Look at those lights,' he said, pointing toward the dark pewter surface of the river. 'You'll have to dig water to reach them.'

'Not really,' she said prosaically. 'All you have to do is to touch these lights here. They're horrible, these sodium lights, they make you look purple.'

'You too.'

'They're equalizers of colour,' he said, lowering his face, bringing his lips near to hers. 'Purple to purple.'

'Dust to dust.'

The clock tower struck twelve.

His sands in Kempton were running out. But his need for Pamela was growing. It was a need for her companionship, soft and receptive. There was little of carnal passion in it. And yet he felt uneasy remembering the all night parties with John that she had once mentioned casually. What happened at those all night parties, he had often wondered. Ah, well, it was futile to start speculating again. He was himself a transient now, bracing himself for a life in the heaving, churning belly of London. He might as well tell Pamela that, and be done with it. Next time.

And then Dev's dilemma was solved. Abruptly. As abruptly as it had arisen. And by Whitfield. Globe-Kem's subsidiary

in Cheverly, Hareson, Kox and Brown Ltd., was in urgent need of two draughtsmen; and Whitfield recommended Dev to them. A simple, straightforward interview, and the job was his. So, technically speaking, Dev was going to be transferred to a subsidiary company in Cheverly. No longer the haze that surrounded his feelings for Pamela. He loved her. He would tell her so.

But would he? He saw a chasm between his nebulous thought and the concrete action. At heart a middle class Hindu he was bashful in matters of love. His knowledge of love began and ended with novels and poetry, and the dialogue of celluloid heroes in Hindi movies. He had no experience of a girl's company: dating was unknown in his community. When boys and girls felt irresistibly attracted to one another they scribbled awkward love letters. It was a risky business. You never knew in whose hands the letter would fall. He had once written a love letter to a girl in his class, and received a menacing visit from her tall, pock-marked brother. So most love withered. Girls were married off early, not later than twenty, and always by their parents. It was the same with boys unless the parents were sending the boy to college when marriage had to wait until after graduation. Dev would have been one such boy had not the partition of the Indian sub-continent displaced his community in Multan (in West Pakistan) and scattered it over the arc of Delhi and Bombay.

This scattering, loosening up, had helped Dev. For, as long as he remembered, he found his father's disciplinary hand too stifling. He wanted to run away, from home. He had. Twice. But, soon lodged in a college hall hundreds of miles from his parents in Delhi, his running away became formal. He enjoyed that. Finding a job away from Delhi, and then sailing for England was a continuation of the same running away. Yet the past was with him.

He was in love with a girl but unable to express it, bound by his habits, a captive of his origins. He could break into a Hindi song, as he often did, singing it inside his head, a

lyric crammed with rich images; but to spout love in cold English prose—well, that would need a lot of doing.

He could write to her, translate some of the Hindi imagery into English; but it might look false on a piece of paper, overblown. No, he would have to say it. But how? In a light hearted mood, intoxicated with alcohol? Or in intimate contact with her, in the dim lights of a dance hall? Or both? They were going to the new dance hall in Raddington, anyway.

She declined his suggestion for drinking and he, being short on cash, did not press. They were early at the dance hall. It was quite empty. They danced with a correct distance between them. That wouldn't do, Dev thought. Soon the band had its break and when they returned they played a fast number. Too bad. But at least the hall was beginning to fill.

Finally, a soft number with a crooner at the microphone. Dancing slowly yet tensely, Dev could hear nothing but the furious thumping in his temples. He started mumbling, 'I have . . .' when Pamela said, 'He sings so well, doesn't he?' 'Yes.'

It was another minute before Dev could recover his romantic mood. Just then the music stopped.

They went to the snack bar in the gallery for a cup of tea for her, and two cups of black coffee for him. Refreshed, they returned to the dance floor for another slow number.

The lights went dimmer and dimmer; the glass-wheel in the ceiling went round and round reflecting different lights—green, purple, red, yellow, blue—soft soothing light, soft soothing music. She snuggled closer and closer in his arms. He tensed. Not only because he was pregnant with words of love but also because, at that moment, his bladder was bursting: two cups of coffee were having their effect. He could think of nothing else but relieving himself. Minutes lengthened, and with it his misery.

The dance over, he darted through the hall to the gents' only to find it packed with men just out of the pubs. Finally,

he relieved himself. He felt his romantic thoughts reviving.

During the next slow number they clung together, going round and round, in the same spot. All his energies were focussed on enjoying the present moments of pleasure, yet he allowed his premeditated thoughts to project themselves in words: 'I've come to the conclusion . . . I mean, I find myself,' he began huskily—but felt paralysed by a series of pulsations between his legs as she pressed herself against him with all her desire.

'You were saying something,' she said after the dance, as they began walking to the chairs by the wall.

'Nothing,' he replied. He felt drained of interest in her, and thought she was a bit too short for him, plumpish, with only average looks. 'I guess I told you we were to see the D'Limas on Friday instead of Thursday.'

'Yes.'

Pamela must have read his thoughts in the dance hall for she appeared on Friday evening wearing an ultra-tight skirt, and a tight fitting coat. Her buttocks seemed to have contracted. Or was it a new girdle? He had to tilt his scooter, almost touching the street with the handlebar, before she could get on the pillion without tearing her skirt.

D'Limas' place was full of exotic aromas when Pamela and Dev arrived. Tony had done the cooking, a fact he proudly mentioned to Pamela as he passed a plate of rice to her, adding, 'I was careful not to make the curry too hot for you.'

'He put half a dozen ice cubes in it,' Dev quipped.

'You and your word-game again,' Pamela said, returning his grin. She poured some curry over her rice and took a bite. 'Mmmm . . . delicious'

After dinner, tea cups in hand, they went to the lounge. 'Terrible weather,' Tony said, turning on the electric heater. 'Like the middle of winter.'

'It was gorgeously warm in Bombay,' Monica said, closing her eyes. 'We went to the Juhu beach almost every day. I had such a nice tan. It didn't last though.'

'And mine doesn't come off,' said Dev half-facetiously.

'Well, you should have seen me when I got back from Spain this summer,' said Pamela. 'I used tons of lotion and got brown as a gypsy.'

'Or as Siva's *lingum*,' Dev blurted out. He wished he hadn't spoken.

'What's that?' Pamela asked.

The real meaning (Siva's penis) would have made everyone blush with embarrassment. 'It's a patent name for a cream,' Dev improvised, 'a bleaching cream.'

Monica and Pamela looked at Dev and at each other, confused. Tony realized the mess Dev had made. 'Did it do any good?' he asked, carrying the falsehood of Dev's statement one step further.

'Some things in life can never change,' Dev replied.

'Like the colour of one's eyes,' Monica said.

'No, not exactly,' Dev said. 'Nowadays you can buy tinted contact-lenses for eyes: they'll change the colour all right.'

'But not the shape of your nose.'

'Or your accent,' Pamela said with a thick Kemptonian accent.

They burst out laughing.

'Of course, there are accents and accents,' Tony said.

'I'd never have guessed there was a Bombay accent and a Madras accent, and a Calcutta accent,' Monica said.

'Is Calcutta as warm as Bombay?' Pamela sounded anxious.

There she goes, Calcutta again; it's that Johnnie boy on her mind, Dev thought.

'Not quite,' Tony replied. 'A dirty city, Calcutta. But full of artists. That Indian painting there,' he said, pointing to the large canvas on the wall, 'it's by someone from Calcutta.'

'It looks so distinctive,' Pamela said, getting up to look at the painting closely. 'It's like the whole room here. You've decorated it with such taste and imagination.'

'Thank you': Tony and Monica spoke simultaneously.

'I wonder how Dev's room looks,' Pam said with a smile.

'Like yours,' Dev stammered, trying not to blush.

'How can you say that when you haven't seen mine?' Pamela asked, uneasy at the implication of his statement.

'No need to. In this country one room is no different from another,' Dev said.

'Quite,' Tony nodded.

'Well, my room will make you take back your statement,' Pamela said; 'only it's too late, as you're leaving tomorrow—'

'Excuse me,' Monica said to Pamela, 'let me take your cup if you've finished. I want to wash up before Belafonte comes on the telly.'

'I adore Belafonte,' Pamela said, starry eyed. 'Let me help you with the dishes.'

'No, thank you. I'll manage.'

'But I'd love to help.'

'All right.'

Pamela followed Monica to the kitchen where, properly aproned, they set about washing dishes.

'Where did you meet Dev?' Monica asked.

'In the library. He was ever so bashful in asking me my name.'

'They're like that, most of them, anyway, not being used to young female company in their country.'

'I like it that way—the attention he pays me, as if he was trying to win me over every time we meet. Not like English boys: they take you for granted after a while,' Pamela said, squirting liquid soap over a dish. 'Do you ever get the feeling you're being stared at when you're with your husband?'

'In the beginning, yes. Not now. I mean I don't notice it. Besides, when you have a car, you don't walk much anyway.'

'I don't really understand that. An Indian like Dev is no darker than some of the Spaniards I saw.'

'I know. Some Indians are as black as Negroes.'

'That does stand out: a white girl with a West Indian. I couldn't go out with a West Indian,' Pamela said, putting away a bowl. 'You think it's different being married to an Indian than to an Englishman?'

'Not much, I suppose, except that with an Indian you're sure he'll be faithful to you. Not much chance for him to sleep around. Why do you ask?' Monica said, smothering a smile. 'How old are you?'

'Twenty-three.'

'Hm . . .'

'I have a couple of English boyfriends, Ray and Bob. Ray has been chasing me for God knows how long—but he has an artificial eye, not that anybody notices. Well, that's it. The dishes are done.'

'Thank you. Let's not miss our Belafonte. Oh, it's past the time.'

They threw their aprons away and went into the lounge, anxious.

'Only Belafonte, I suppose,' Dev said, when the television was switched on, but no one heard him: already they had their eyes fixed on the set.

They watched television until the Epilogue; and after supper, Dev and Pamela left.

As Pamela was getting off the scooter, Dev said, 'It's still not too late to inspect your room.' She pinched him so hard on the back of his neck, he almost fell off his scooter.

'I must go in soon,' she said. 'It's late and it's cold.'

'Did you like them?' he asked after a long kiss.

'Yes, a nice couple.'

'Like you and me.'

'What do you mean?' Her arms fell away.

'You'll see it in writing,' he shouted, kick-starting his scooter.

PART TWO

Chapter Six

The day began badly for Dev. The sky was overcast and he was late for breakfast. While driving to Cheverly the front tyre of his scooter went flat suddenly: the handle bar wobbled, the scooter weaved in and out on the road, and before he could brake it, he was thrown off, across the road. He wasn't hurt much, just bruises. But it was a long time before he could continue his journey: his spare was flat too.

After a tortuous search in the fog and rain Dev finally arrived at the digs arranged through the company. Helmet in one hand and a suitcase in the other, he rang the bell.

A greasy old face peered through the door, crying, 'They said you were coming on Friday. Anyway you pay Friday to Friday. In advance. The room's upstairs, a nice room. It's three pounds fifteen. If you want coal, five bob extra. Supper's at ten. Five bob extra if you want it.'

Dev nodded 'Yes' as he followed her through the dark alleyway.

'You never know—the woman next door, her boarder didn't pay her nothing for three weeks. Last night, he packed his little bag and left, when they were all sleeping.'

Dev nodded 'Yes' and closed the lounge door after him.

'You never know,' she said, settling in an old armchair. 'I can't read nor write—so many of us from Ireland like that, my son went to a school though—but you can't fool me. I know the full value of a pound. There's other boarders. Not here now, they're all gone out tonight: Workingmen's club.'

Saturday is the big night out—cards and beer and singing,' she said, smiling for the first time.

'Yes.'

'My son—he's too young for the club. He likes dancing. He's a good-looker, like his father. God bless his soul!' She crossed herself. 'I've a coloured lodger, a seaman. He's gone to sea now. You'll see him at Christmas. An orphan from some place in the East—with a "pore" or "pur" in it. His parents were killed in the war. Terrible.' She crossed herself again. 'He's real dark, darker than you.'

That was the trouble about living in a country like England, Dev thought: you were just a 'coloured person'; it didn't matter whether you were a seaman or an engineer or a businessman, or a Burmese, an Indian or a Nigerian; all that the white natives said about you was that you were a 'coloured person', and when they met one, they talked of others they had known as if all 'coloured persons' were blood brothers.

'I treat them all alike,' she went on. 'Like the keys of a piano. God made them all of the same earth. The Father says so. It's a good Catholic name the seaman has. I forget . . . Well, you wait, it'll come to me . . .'

Dev thought he was in hell: a coal fire blazed under the mantelpiece, a TV set blared in a corner, a cat mewed and kept jumping over the dining table cluttered with left-over china, the plump little woman talked incessantly as he stood motionless suffering the draught from the lounge door with his overcoat on.

'It's three pounds fifteen,' she said, extending her fat little hand.

'I'm sorry . . . I, I don't have enough . . . now,' he said. 'On Monday when the post office opens.'

'Give me a pound then—something. I need money for groceries. You can't eat without groceries, can you?'

'No.'

'Would you like a cuppa of tea?' she asked, grabbing his

two ten-shilling notes. 'And pull up a chair. No, not near the telly.'

Looking out of his gaudy little room Dev saw the same dreary buildings of old sooty bricks that line the streets of working-class districts of every British town. Nor did the scene change at Hareson, Kox and Brown Ltd., situated as it was in another slum of Cheverly. Compared to Globe-Kem Company, everything was small: about 400 employees, a third of whom worked in offices on the upper floors of a four-storey building. Dev's section 'Development and Design' had a dozen draughtsmen; an equal number were in the 'Drawing' section.

Sitting straight on a backless stool and looking at the flat drawing-board in a large cold room with a high ceiling and low illumination, Dev felt like a child who had just been turned over from a doting grandmother to a stern stepfather: no longer the cheerful relaxed atmosphere of the Globe-Kem office, the boisterous company of Bruce by his side; no longer *any* company by his side, placed as he was alone, at the centre of the room wide aisles separating him from the others. He dared not cross the aisles for a chat with a colleague for fear of drawing his boss's malevolent attention. In the canteen his colleagues were too immersed in their linoleum floors, driving tests, TV programmes and sports to notice his presence. At his digs between the din of a full volume telly and the garrulous landlady he was lucky to be able to say a word. His speech became so rare that he noticed it every time he was allowed the indulgence.

On Saturday he felt an urge to go to Kempton by scooter but cold wet weather, growing worse with the day, kept him back. Besides, he had told Pamela, 'You'll see it in writing.' He thought it best to write to her.

And the itch to write to her heightened with each refusal at the local dance hall. He began his letter to her the same night. A few lines, and he could write no more. His hand was paralyzed by a debate in his mind, one side prodding him to propose marriage to her, the other pleading caution, arguing

thus: to go after the very first girl he had dated showed that it was not *the* girl he was in love with but just *a* girl. Perhaps, not. It was too early to tell, so let time decide: if his feelings for her did not fade, then surely he must propose to her. Unable to choose, he went to sleep.

In the morning his mind was clear: he would stay away from the Pamela Road, at the end of which stood a little house with a garden, a car, gadgets galore, a couple of kids, a fortnight's holiday each year on the Continent, and forty long years of drudgery as a draughtsman. No, that was not for him. He finished his letter with a humorous description of his scooter accident.

And the next, a week later.

He waited for her reply. None came.

At first his waiting was that of a prospective traveller at a bus stop: a matter-of-fact waiting. Days passed without a word from her. His normal anticipation escalated to mild disquiet, then to extreme eagerness. If she intended to make her absence felt acutely, she had succeeded admirably: he missed her more than ever—but that did not mean he would go running to Kempton. Not now, anyway, when they had, somehow, found themselves engaged in a tug-of-war, saying in effect: 'Let's see who needs whom, how much?' There he would hold his ground, keep his dignity, no matter what. If she was not willing to give without bargaining, he too would keep his interest in her to himself. Not only that. He would try to rid himself of any interest in her. In fact, that was already happening; his interest after reaching a peak was beginning to ebb. It was then that he received a letter from her: it was a friendly letter with a touch of humour. He read it over many times, hoping his feelings for her would revive, but they didn't. He knew it was all over between them, yet he continued to write to her: better a slender thread between them than none at all.

Among the twenty-odd people present at the Devanta Institute Arjun found himself the only Indian. He was quite

impressed with the lecture-demonstration on 'The Pran-yama Yoga', and put in a half-crown when the plate was passed. The meeting over, he removed his shoes and went upstairs to the 'Prayers' room. In the semi-dark he noticed a few people, sitting close-eyed, cross-legged on a carpet facing a large picture, marked 'The Sage Of India'. None of them looked Indian. Arjun tried to cross his legs and in the process released some gas—'Tooon!' He felt a stab of shame. He shut his eyes. Tight.

Too tight and for too long, for he missed the young priest, robed in white, enter the room with a glass screen and a brass tray and conduct a silent ceremony sitting next to 'The Sage Of India'. Only when the priest began playing a harmonium and singing hymns did Arjun open his eyes. Others joined in singing, but Arjun kept quiet. He knew neither the hymns nor the language in which they were composed. To be the only Indian among Britishers singing hymns in Sanskrit, Arjun smiled inwardly at the irony. A prayer was then said aloud. It was in English, and yet he could only understand a word here and there—pain, flesh, purity, mind, body . . .

Arjun was quite moved by the serenity of the ceremony. He would have liked to stay on to meditate like a few of the others but his back was beginning to ache. He left quietly and walked to the back-garden.

It was a spacious garden with apple trees. From its edge he had a wonderful view of London: the winding river, the smoking chimneys.

'Would you guess my name is Indira Devi?'

'No,' Arjun replied, confused, turning around—and found himself facing a chubby middle-aged woman with rosy cheeks and slitty eyes behind a pair of blue spectacles.

'I'm a converted Hindu,' she said, showing her small teeth in a friendly smile.

'I'm a vegetarian.'

'There aren't many like me in this world—converted Hindus, I mean. It all came to me in a dream: a swami in a

loin-cloth with a revolving *chakra* behind his head guiding me.' She closed her eyes and held her hands over her bosom. 'I recognized him the moment I saw his picture here. The Sage of India! That's strange, isn't it?' Arjun did not know what to make of her: was she pulling his leg?—was she sincere?—was she a crackpot? She looked so healthy. 'It's a shame one doesn't see many Indians here,' she went on. 'You're the first one I've seen in three months.'

'I was curious—'

'Yes, I understand. It's hard on Hindus in England, no temples and so many factions: Vishnuites, Shivaitees, Krishnaites and so on. So we thought we'll go to the fundamental word: Om.'

'Om,' Arjun repeated, without meaning to.

'It's the sweetest, kindest word in the human vocabulary,' she said closing her eyes, placing her hands over her bosom. 'Om, Om.' She opened her eyes. 'Let's go inside. You might catch cold here.'

Arjun followed her to a room marked 'Library'.

'We meet twice a month,' she said, burrowing into her handbag, 'the "Om Society of Great Britain". Here's our card with the address on it—and a membership form. You'd come next Sunday, wouldn't you?'

'I must—'

'Yes, you must come. The address is there,' she said, pointing to the papers now in Arjun's hand. 'Only two minutes from Hampstead tube. Here's a biro if you like to fill in the form now. No admission fee for born Hindus.'

Though Arjun left the Devanta Institute that evening with a firm promise to Indira Devi about attending the Om Society meeting, he had no intention of fulfilling it. On Sunday morning, however, he had a change of heart: he owed it to the Hindu part of his religiosity to visit the Om Society, at least, once. When he arrived at 333, Hampstead Crescent, an Englishman wearing a white coat and white fez-cap welcomed him: 'Mr Aswani?'

'Yes.'

'I'm Shiva-Krishna. Please follow me.'

They stopped at the end of a dark hallway where white bedsheets were stacked high against the wall. 'Your shoes there,' Shiva-Krishna said, pointing to a corner littered with shoes. 'Please use this before entering,' he said, and handed Arjun a white sheet. 'You sit in the back, right hand corner. This way, please.'

Arjun was too confused to ask questions: he just followed the instructions. At the end of the corridor, he turned a door knob and saw white-robed figures sitting on a carpet in a large room with a platform at the far end. He walked to the right hand corner and sat down. Since the figures were completely covered with white sheets, he couldn't tell male from female. Where was Indira Devi? Shouldn't he go out and ask for her. Suddenly the lights dimmed. A squarish figure draped in white stepped onto the platform and sat cross-legged at the microphone 'Om!' the figure said musically.

'Om!' echoed the congregation.

Arjun tightened the sheet around himself and closed his eyes: he could sense someone sitting next to him, shouting, 'Om! Om!'

The congregation was busy chanting 'Om! Om!' and swaying their heads.

'Hari Om!' the microphone said. 'Hari Om!'

'Hari Om! Hari Om!'

The pronunciation was so British, Arjun thought he heard, 'Hurry 'ome! Hurry 'ome!' He opened his eyes but found nothing alarming. He shut his eyes and joined the chorus of voices.

'What are you doing tonight?' Arjun heard. My God, they're making love here, Arjun thought: what a way to desecrate a place of worship!

'What are you doing tonight?' Arjun heard again, as a hand crept under his sheet and reached his bottom. He was flabbergasted. 'Hurry 'ome! Hurry 'ome!' he chanted, swaying his torso.

'You have clean ones. You wash yours, don't you?'—the voice asked while the hand explored his bottom.

Arjun raised his left hand: SLAM! he hit the intruding wrist with all his moral indignation. The arm withdrew. A bell chimed. Slowly a blue light spread from behind the platform; a figure in white sprinkled water in the room chanting 'Amrita! Amrita!'—and then a pair of cymbals joined in. Arjun rushed out, dropping his sheet, putting his feet in a pair of shoes and carrying his coat over his shoulder.

The daylight came as a relief to him. He stopped to put on his coat and tie the shoe laces: 'Damn it! These aren't my shoes!'

Most of the activities of the Cheverly University Students' Union took place in the Union Hall, a two-storey L-shaped building. If you were a man visiting the building on a Saturday evening, you would turn right at the entrance porch, leave your coat in the unattended cloakroom, use the adjoining washroom perhaps, step out in the hallway to the dance hall on the left or the jazz room on the right, or climb up the stairs to the bar. If you were a woman you would turn left at the entrance, leave your coat in the cloakroom and cross over to the dance-hall, or the common room upstairs.

'Where's your I.D.?' a bearded young man asked Dev, as he was walking past the table across the hallway.

'I.D.?' Dev blinked his eyes.

'Yes, the card.'

'Of course—' Dev said, stepping back to let a group of girls go by. They showed their identity cards, paid a shilling each and had their palms stamped by the young man.

Dev thought he would leave, but watching a steady stream of pretty girls go past the desk he changed his mind. He entered the cloakroom, put on his coat, but lingered on, looking preoccupied and—when there was no one around—exchanged his scarf for a university-scarf. Then he stood at the edge of the cloakroom, looking out. He saw the bearded young man leave the desk. He walked lazily toward it.

'I.D.?' a clean-shaven man asked.

'Yes,' said Dev, holding the university-scarf in one hand and searching his pockets with the other.

'That's all right, you can go in. There's a coat hanger in the jazz room.'

'Thank you.'

Riding a wave of delight at breaking the identity card barrier Dev approached the first girl that met his eye. And the eye, in such cases, catches the tallest object. Soon Dev was reeling out anecdotes about 'A tall dark stranger from the mystic East' before the tall, big-boned Mabel Mulberry. She listened quietly, politely; but when in the middle of a story he said, 'The tall dark stranger from the mystic East that you've been waiting for,' she broke into a smile and said, 'But it isn't you.'

'Nor is it non-U.'

'You got me there.'

'I haven't got U—only X, an unknown quantity.'

'There isn't much to know.'

But that wasn't so. A week later relaxing in the cosy atmosphere of a night club in the city centre Mabel rambled on about her parents, 'My father was a drunk and a sod, it was my mother who scrimped and scrounged to bring us up decent, made us go to Sunday school regularly . . .'

'What happens at a Sunday school?'

'Oh, you read the Bible, sing hymns, discuss. I liked it after a while. That was where I met the boy I got engaged to, later on.'

'When you were sweet sixteen,' he said, smiling.

'No, when I was a sweet secretary in a small office in the West End. By the way, I'm cockney, if you haven't noticed. Two gin and tonics, and my grammar school accent starts slipping.'

'Let it slip all the way,' he said, and ordered another gin and tonic.

Suddenly she gripped him by the wrist and said, 'What's the purpose of life?'

He was startled.

'Don't worry,' she said, releasing his wrist. 'It was just like that the question seized my mind one summer afternoon. I was in the office washroom looking out when a car screeched to a halt. A man fell flat, dead. Dead in the road. A living, throbbing man dead in a flash. Just like that,' she snapped her fingers. 'I looked away—into the mirror. There was little me, staring at myself, asking, "What's the purpose of life?" I couldn't drive that blood spattered face away from my mind. I couldn't eat for two days. My fiancé thought I was going nuts. Oh, go away, I told him, take your pimply little face and your savings bonds away from me. I want something better from life, something meaningful. I want to do something, learn something. That was it, learn something. So I ditched him and came to the university. It's a two-year course in sociology. I'm in the second year. I love the university life, the Labour Club, C.N.D., the lot.'

'Tell me more about the Labour Club.'

'It's no use to a chap like you. They hold their debates and lectures during the lunch hour. The Neoleft Club will suit you but that's next year. What about your Christmas?'

'In London.'

'How wonderful! That's where I live, in Silvers Bar, a suburb of London. With my brother's family.'

'We'll meet in London then.'

'Oh yes.'

But, when in London, Dev was more anxious to see Arjun. On Christmas Day Arjun came to his room at the Earls Court hostel, wrapped in an overcoat, scarf, hat, gloves and galoshes. 'You look fairer,' Arjun said to Dev, even before he had shaken hands.

'Do I?'

'At least two shades lighter, my Pakistani Twin,' Arjun said, regarding Dev in the 40-watt light of his room. 'At least two thousand rupees more.'

'Where?'

'In the marriage market, where else? Did I tell you I almost got married before—'

'No, you didn't.'

'Just before I got the scholarship.'

'Good job you didn't get married. At the end of all this you'll fetch twice as much. And higher salary with Erikssons too. How are they doing?'

'Very well, very well indeed. Everything is expanding. They're entering the ship repair business. They've set up a subsidiary, Aqua Limited, in Calcutta, and hired two experts from England. They came to Bombay to look at our manufacturing facilities just before I left. One of them looked fresh from a university.'

'From an evening college is more likely,' Dev remarked. 'Did you say ship repairing? And a young chap from England? Is he called Tomlinson?'

'Could be. I'm not sure. To me it's one more "son" or "sen" in the company.'

'Carson the carpenter, Polson the painter,' Dev said with a malicious smile. 'Not to mention old Eriksson, the mechanic, who started it all.'

'Well, he's slowly fading into the background. The European directors have been steadily selling out their shares to the Indians.'

'While the British oil companies have been throwing a few crumbs at the natives. A couple of scholarships to England.'

'Well, at least that's something,' Arjun said, cracking his knuckles. Then he looked up, and pointing to the wall heater said, 'Does that keep you warm here? It's so damn cold in this country.'

'All the more so for a vegetarian like you.'

'Ex-vegetarian.'

'Ex-vegetarian?' Dev was astounded.

'Yes,' Arjun nodded slowly, woefully. He had always thought of killing birds and animals and eating them with a great revulsion. To him life, all life, was sacred. It had been a

bitter decision for him to pollute his purity with animal blood, to submit to an outside pressure so violently in conflict with his inner conviction. 'I had to,' he went on, guiltily, 'Only chicken and lamb, nothing else. For the sake of my health, you see. I couldn't get over my colds. And my doctor friend kept on about taking "animal-protein". But I'll give it up once I'm back home, I promise you.'

'I hope you can,' Dev said sceptically. 'Well, I feel hungry. Let's go out.'

At one moment Mabel thought Christmas had become too commercial and at the other she was telling Dev, in detail, all the presents she had received from her relatives. 'Some of the presents come in very handy,' she went on. 'I hadn't a clue what I was going to give my girl friend who's getting married soon, but now I have a gorgeous pair of gloves that I'll pass on to her.'

'Crafty,' he said, pressing her hand over the table.

And, smiling, they left the Lyons near the Earls Court tube station, and wandered around, not knowing what to do next but not discussing it either, stopping to look at wines or pipes or record players in shop windows, or walking the bylanes, she looking up and down, admiring a balcony here and a window curtain there, and saying how majestic the columns looked, and asking if his hostel too had such columns, and he replying, no—it being a grimy old building, fit for a bulldozer; and she saving, it'd be nice to see his room, and that the area was called Earls Court because it was once a district for aristocrats; whereupon he said, how strange, or some such thing, because he did not know what exactly he was saying or doing after he had heard: 'It'd be nice to see your room.' Here was a respectable white woman literally throwing herself into his bed. It'd be a pity to let her go out because of the hostel rules. The rules could be broken, at least he could do was to try. So he did. They were at the hostel door. He threw a

burglar's look: nobody in the lounge; the manager's desk empty. Good.

He took the first steps up the stairs, two at a time, his arm dragging hers. They reached the first floor. He heard steps above. His heart stopped. The man above might squeal on him: pure jealousy. His hand tightened over hers. Thinking of rushing down the steps he turned his head, and caught a glimpse of her face: she looked expectant, eager. He couldn't let her down. The manager would, at the most, ask him to leave the next day, what else?

The steps above stopped. He heard a bolt locking; his bowels relaxed. He resumed his nervous motion upward and continued until they were behind the door of his room.

They met like lovers who tryst in the shadows with fierce passion. In a few slow steps they fell on the narrow squeaky bed. She arched to fill her gap, holding all of him between her arms, within herself, he feeling lost in a vast sense of pleasure sweeping through his body. When they separated—their heart beats slower; their bodies limp with exhaustion—they returned to a world that was no longer the same. At least not for Dev.

My first white woman, he kept telling himself. Was it love or infatuation—or simply sexual hunger?—or was it revenge on the white race, a retaliation for the million injustices they had inflicted on the dark races like his? He wished he knew. No single answer seemed satisfactory. Perhaps, each answer was valid partly. Had it to be Mabel Margaret Mulberry? No. It could have been any one of 'them': the waitress in the Kempton hostel, the office girl, the dance studio instructress; Pamela Appleworth; or even Monica D'Lima for that matter. Hadn't he seduced them all, with his eyes closed, his groin rubbing against the bedsheets? So, what was the difference? No, there was a difference: this was real, with an actual inward thrust. He felt an urge to thank Mabel. But he didn't. No, he must take as much as he could, and act as if it were all his. Still, his tenderness persisted; he caressed her light brown hair. She turned her

face away, mumbling, 'Not many English girls would go to a man's room.'

And fewer still would *ask* to be taken there, he wanted to say, but—'My sweet Mabel, sweet as a ripe mango,' he whispered, nuzzling her ear.

'Sweet as a ripe mango,' she repeated, shaking with laughter. 'What a simile!'

'Ssssh . . .' he said, 'you may be disturbing others.'

'What are Indian women like?' she asked quietening down.

'Like women everywhere: they bear children and like to mate.'

'According to the Kama Sutra.'

'How do you know about the book?'

'An R.A.F. officer lent it to me once: he had bought it in India.'

'Why not an Army officer?'

'Because last year my digs were near an R.A.F. station on the outskirts of Cheverly, and I used to go to the Officers' dances. But why am I telling you all this?'

'Because I'm your Father Confessor.'

'You get facetious at the wrong moments sometimes,' she said. 'You wouldn't believe it, but only a few years ago I was so prudish I couldn't look at men's underpants in a shop-window without blushing. Of course, when you're engaged to be married you can't remain innocent, can you, specially when your man is so persistent as mine was. For the sake of our future happiness, he'd plead, evening after evening. But I did feel guilty the first time: I kept my eyes shut.'

'And a little less the next time.'

'Yes. But a single woman must *always* be on guard,' she said rather vehemently, and turned over.

'There must be exceptions to it,' he said; but she seemed too engrossed probably recalling past experiences to reply. His thoughts drifted towards Pamela. A few energetic spasms into the body of Mabel had purged him of the residue of

feeling he had held for Pamela. The next letter to her would be the last, he decided with finality. 'Can I see you tomorrow?' he asked Mabel.

'Do you have something in mind?'

'Yes. Would you like to see an Indian film?'

'That'll be fun.'

'Along with a friend of mine from Bombay?'

'Double fun.'

Dev and Mabel were glumly looking at the 'House Full' sign outside the Erasmus Theatre near Goodge Street tube station when Arjun came dashing out of the foyer, 'Bad luck, Dev. All tickets sold out. Sometimes they play dirty tricks here.'

'But,' said Dev, 'there's still an hour to go before the film starts.'

'With these Indian film societies you never know. They say they started selling tickets at three. The show is at eight. There's no way to find out what they're up to. These crooks!'

'Meet Mabel,' Dev said. Arjun changed his frown to a smile as he shook hands with Mabel. 'What next?' Dev asked.

'Let's hang around,' Arjun said, 'there are always people whose friends don't turn up at the last moment.'

They were not the only ones without tickets. There were many others, standing in little knots outside the theatre talking loudly, or arguing, or plying every group of fresh arrivals with queries—'Got tickets?'; 'Some extras?'; 'Want to sell in the black?'

'Pssst . . .' a man selling the *Filmfare* suddenly whispered in Dev's ear, 'Want tickets?' Dev regarded the man with a suspicious eye. 'Around the corner,' the man said.

'Come on,' Dev said, pulling Arjun by the arm, while keeping Mabel from following them, 'No, no, you stay there.'

They turned right at the first intersection up the road and approached a cluster of men surrounding a car in the dark

street. A torch light flashed in the car, revealing two people, one of whom said: 'Fifteen shillings.'

'But the price is five and six,' a man outside argued, stooping to the level of the car window.

'Fifteen shillings. Don't waste time,' cried the voice from inside. The car window rolled up; the torch light went out; and dark faces inside looked straight ahead.

The man outside, still grumbling, stepped aside to confer with his friends. 'All right, all right,' Dev cried, tapping the car window. 'Have you five shillings?' he asked Arjun as the window rolled down. 'There,' he said, thrusting his hand inside the car, 'two pounds five. Give me three tickets.'

'Quick', the man with the torch said nervously, as the other man counted the tickets, 'I see a police car. Quick.' He turned the ignition key. The other man put the tickets in Dev's hand as the car sped off.

'That was close,' Arjun said, relieved.

The hall was packed long before the starting-time. Dev thought the sight curious: a sea of brown faces in the heart of London. Half of the row in front of him was taken up by a family: father, mother and a string of children. An infant cried, and the mother put her breast to its mouth under the cover of her sari.

'Is that how you grew up?' Mabel asked, nudging Dev.

'It's a male's privilege to be sucking breasts at *all* ages,' Dev replied, smiling. But she did not notice it: the film had begun.

The story unrolled itself at an excruciatingly slow pace with frequent pauses for songs and dances. Every time the hero came within breathing space of the heroine, boos, cat-calls and wolf-whistles filled the hall—and then a shower of pennies would roll down the aisles.

'Why all the shouting?' Mabel asked Dev.

'Protest against film censoring. According to the censors there, it is un-Indian to kiss in public.'

'I thought *we* were puritan.'

'Everything is relative.'

Once again the wolf-whistles and cat calls—and a handful of pennies rolled down the aisles.

'Who's throwing the pennies?' Mabel enquired.

'A man with a lot of pennies to throw.'

Mabel smacked him on the wrist: 'That's for being too smart.'

Later Arjun was more helpful to Mabel. 'It's an old custom,' he explained, sipping tea in a Greek restaurant. 'You take a handful of coins or spices or sweets, hover them over the person you like, and throw them to a crowd.'

'That's what the Mughul emperors used to do, and the lower echelons copied them,' Dev added.

'I understand that now,' Mabel said, looking at Arjun, 'but what I can't understand is why the husband got so furious that he pointed a pistol at his wife just because he had found an old love letter addressed to her?'

'Everything is relative,' Dev replied.

'Let him explain,' Mabel said to Dev, annoyed. 'He wants to.'

'Our Indian women are morally pure and faithful,' Arjun began, rather pompously. 'That's our heritage: they don't show off their bodies for example and—'

'No, they don't,' Dev cut in. 'They do it with their clothes on.'

'Please, Dev,' Mabel appealed

'There's a time and a place for everything,' Arjun said with the gravity of Buddha. 'That's why—'

'Indian men love to look at woman's flesh as long as it isn't their sisters' or wives' or daughters', Dev interjected.

'Our tradition—' Arjun started to say.

'Is clear from the frescoes that illustrate fornication.'

'You're getting vulgar,' Mabel said, throwing Dev a reproachful glance.

'No, unhypocritical. The oldest manual on sex is Indian.'

'That was a long time back,' Arjun argued.

'All tradition is a long time back.'

Chapter Seven

The city centre of Cheverly was divided evenly by two national roads: A309 and A903. The first road passed the Town Hall and the Royal Memorial, and the second touched the public library, an office building, the Grand Hotel and the war memorial; at the intersection of the two stood a gaudy music shop, an antique shop, a modernistic travel agency and a bakery over which, at night, flashed a sign of a blue dragon with the words 'Chinese Cuisine' written in Chinese style. It was under this sign that Dev had been waiting for a few minutes for Mabel, with his stare fixed at a Queen of England sitting majestically, sceptre in hand, over an underground public-convenience. Unwilling to wait any longer, Dev walked down a block. He thought he saw a station wagon that looked familiar.

He crossed the road. Yes, that *was* Tony's station wagon: CFI-729. Tony was in town and hadn't told him: what a friend! Dev entered the Grand Hotel and asked the desk-clerk, who checked the guest list and said, 'Sorry, sir, Mr D'Lima is not registered with us.' He was about to leave when he saw a familiar figure walking down the corridor swinging her handbag. 'Hello, Monica,' he said, 'where's Tony?'

'Tony?' she repeated abstractly. 'Yes, Tony, he's in London,' she replied, and tossed her head in the direction of the saloon bar. Dev did the same: he thought he saw a man resembling Neil Mahoney come to the door of the bar and

dart back, but he couldn't be sure. 'Let's go and have a cup of tea,' she said, taking Dev by the elbow.

'But you don't have a coat on.'

'Don't need it. The café is just across. You see, Cheverly is the only decent place to buy the stuff we need—for our restaurant, you see,' she said, stepping out of the hotel, her hand still at Dev's elbow. 'We buy it wholesale, and pick it up ourselves, you see.'

They entered the steam-filled café and managed to find a table.

'How is Tony?' Dev asked her.

'He's fine, fine,' she said, and began searching in her hand-bag for a lighter. 'He's in London, you see.'

'Are you going to live in London?'

'No, never,' she replied, blowing smoke across the table. 'There's a problem in his office. You see, he's the most qualified and the most senior in his section at Builders Limited. So, when they transferred his boss to another work-site he thought he'd be promoted.'

'But he wasn't.'

'How did you know?'

'Because we're the same colour—inferior brand.'

'He thinks the same,' she said in a low voice, adding milk to her coffee. 'They couldn't let a coloured man supervise the whites, he says.'

'They couldn't let an inferior brand supervise the superior.'

'You take this as a joke—with a big smile.'

'That's the only way,' he said, still smiling. 'Your coffee is getting cold. Want some sugar?' He moved two bowls of sugar, 'white *and* brown.'

'I'll have a spoonful of each.'

'Symbolic.'

Just how much, you wouldn't guess, she half mumbled to herself, smiling. 'How is your librarian?'

'Pamela, you mean. I wrote her the last letter today.'

'Why?—are you dropping her?'

'One drops something that has weight; this had no weight at all. Besides, she has a low score.'

'The vital statistics, you mean,' Monica said with a mischievous gleam in her eyes. 'She has plenty to spare.'

'No, not that. I have my own indexing system.'

'I must hear this,' Monica said, leaning over the table.

'It covers the whole human personality: physical, mental, and temperamental. Forty points for physical, thirty for mental and thirty for temperamental.'

'What's her score?'

'Forty-one. Sixteen, thirteen and twelve, in that order.'

'So she passes.'

'No. Sixty is pass; seventy is good; eighty, very good; ninety, excellent; and one hundred, non-existent.'

'What's mine?'

'Haven't thought of it. There,' he said, looking out, 'that's my date pacing up and down.'

'What's her score?'

'Fifty-nine, almost passes. She's a woman: low on physical side, high on temperamental. Let me bring her in.'

'No, I must go. My father could do with extra help on Saturday evenings.'

Dev walked to the cashier's desk as Monica slipped through the door. He stroked his hair and straightened his tie before going out.

'I've been waiting here for ten minutes,' Mabel grumbled. 'Looks like snow.'

'My room is warm,' he said, grinning. 'And my scooter has a windscreen.'

She hesitated, and swung her handbag from one hand to the other; but he was already crossing the road. She strode behind him.

In the double bed of his room as he was poised for love she turned abruptly on her side, toppling him down. He felt a fierce rage rising in him, and was about to bawl out when a cramp in his leg dwarfed all feelings except pain. 'This can't

go on for ever,' she said severely. 'I'm not your mistress or your fiancée. I like your company, and we share the same values.' His cramp gone he rose slowly and began fumbling for his clothes in the soft glow of the fire. 'Sharing the same values is not enough reason to be sharing the same bed every week.'

Dev was dressing quietly, thinking, taking stock. He realized he had low cards to play with. Why was it always so with him when it came to playing against girls?

'I like you, I do, but I have other boy friends,' she said, rolling up her stockings. 'Sooner or later they all want to raise your skirt. But then you get one of those public school boys, and you want them badly—more out of curiosity than anything else—and all they do is kiss your cheek and tickle your arse.'

'I guess you could write a thesis on the sexual habits of males of all classes, colours and creeds.' He got up to switch on a light.

'Not really,' she said, dabbing her face with powder. 'My professor wants me to write a thesis on the effects of television on the British working class. He's a Marxist.'

'Ah, that bearded scholar. If he were to rise from his Highgate cemetery for a stroll in London he'd not want to stay out too long. All his visions of workers' solidarity and a classless society.'

'Visions, and more visions. While he was expounding heaven on earth he didn't even bother to feed his own family.'

'How petty can you get?'

'Petty? Or realistic? What's an idea if it can't be practised?' she asked, thrusting her chin defiantly upwards at Dev.

'A man is always so idealistic, full of visions; it's the woman who brings him down to earth, to reality. And she likes peace, not bloody fighting and revolutions. But even revolutions can be bloodless, you know, like ours after the Second World War.'

'Bloodless?' Dev snorted. 'You mean halfhearted.'

'We set up a fullfledged welfare state and you call it halfhearted. We insured John Smith against ill health, old age, unemployment, and made unions strong. . .'

'Strong in numbers, poor in vision.'

'Oh, vision again.'

'Yes, the vision to dump the system crown, gown and bowler hat, when you had the chance . . . in the 1926 general strike.'

'You know *our* history too damn well.'

'Because it spilled over to your damned colonies.'

'The past is past. The present is important, and the future. The times have changed, no longer the times my parents knew.'

'Yes, they have,' he said, nodding his head with a faint smile of scepticism. 'Or have they? Instead of the flocks around the park band-stands, now you have a nation of telly watching morons: football pools prospering, race tracks crowded. "Brothers, we've arrived at the steps of casino society," says Brother Jim Jones, as the crowd throws cloth caps in the air.'

'You're an Eastern version of a puritan, grudging the masses a bit of good time. You'd rather have them pore over a party pamphlet than sip beer or throw darts. A Cromwellian kill-joy.'

'If to broaden and heighten the vision of millions is to be labelled a "kill-joy", count me in.'

'I wish the intellectual in you would learn a simple fact of life.'

'Like?'

'Man is more concerned about a hole in his sock than about the gross national product of France or Fiji.'

'You mean let man stagnate at a level where he can understand only what's direct and personal to him.'

'You're a born do-gooder, whether you know it or not.'

'Why do you always get personal in an argument? It's a

symptom of lack of abstract of imagination from which the typical human female suffers.'

'Big words as usual. And they mean nothing.'

'Words mean a lot to me, living as I am in the intellectual poverty of the working class.'

'Join up with the Neoleft Club, or Ban-the-Bomb group.'

'I will, if I can get hold of them. Neither of them has a fixed address, let alone a phone.'

'Why don't you come to a meeting of the Neoleft Club with me? There's a lecture on British foreign policy. Abstract enough for you?' she asked, grinning widely, revealing her black incisor tooth.

'It all depends on the speaker.'

'My Marxist professor is the speaker. If ever someone has the faculty for abstraction it's him. He's a man of principle, left the Communist Party during the Hungarian trouble.'

Abstraction hardly matched the blotchy beery face of the tall round shouldered man in 'The Plough and The Star' that Mabel pointed out to Dev as the speaker. Then she left him to go and stand at the table weighted down with pamphlets. He had hoped she would sit by his side, drink pints of beer with him, as the speakers, resting his hand against the piano, surveyed the world from a corner of the upper room of 'The Plough and The Star.'

Dev felt forsaken, except when at the end he joined the applause. In the applause there was a communion, a community of feeling, like so many hearts beating with the same rhythm.

'Contributions and questions from the floor, comrades. Please be brief in what you say, but generous in what you pay,' the bald chairman said, smiling coyly. 'You can help us by becoming members.'

A membership form fell in Dev's lap. He filled it in and passed it out to a receiving hand. Then he felt lonely again, adrift. And tired. His thoughts wandered, and his eyes too. But they returned again and again to Mabel. She stood leaning against the wall talking, laughing, giving and taking

money and pamphlets from the comrades flocked around her table.

The noise subsided, and the smoke. The crowd thinned. Dev walked to Mabel's table. 'Did you enjoy yourself?' she asked him heartily.

'Abstractly or concretely?'

'You're being difficult.'

'I won't be—over the weekend,' he hinted.

'I'd love to see you then, but I really have loads of work to do.'

'And the weekend after?'

'It's my room-mate's birthday. We'll most probably be going to her home.'

'I'll try after that, then, Triple M,' he said listlessly.

'Please do.'

It was her 'please do' and 'I like you, Dev, I do' that injected spasmodic life in the wilting plant of his love. And yet, outside, the air was full of promise, of things growing, the sun warming up, the trees turning green, the buds breaking out.

Chapter Eight

Good news struck Mabel twice. She found a job in London during Easter vacation. And a girlfriend offered her free use of her apartment in London while she herself went to France on holiday.

At the Queensway tube station Mabel asked the West Indian ticket collector, 'Which way to Pawson Crescent, please?' He explained in such detail that she lost interest and heard only his last words, 'It's only a few minutes' walk from here.' She nodded politely, and left. But when she hadn't arrived at Pawson Crescent after ten minutes' arm-killing walk, she knew she had lost her way.

'Excuse me,' she said to an approaching Indian, 'which way—er, aren't you Dev's friend?'

'Yes, Mabel Mulberry,' Arjun cried. 'I remember you—that Indian film "Popat".'

'Which way to Pawson Crescent, please?'

'What number? I live there myself.'

'I don't know, the place is called Pawson Mansions.'

'How strange; I live there myself,' Arjun said, flashing a smile. 'It's a big house, four floors. Let me take your suitcase.'

'Only if you give me your grocery bag.'

They exchanged bags, and walked slowly, silently.

'There you are,' Arjun said, breathless, putting the suitcase down outside Mabel's room on the third floor.

'Thank you so much,' Mabel said, 'handing him his grocery bag. 'How about a cup of tea?'

'That's one thing an Indian or an Englishman can never refuse.'

'It's such a small room,' Mabel said, opening the door. 'I had no idea . . .'

'Costs three guineas a week,' Arjun said. His eyes were roving to spot something distinctly feminine about the room, and found it: bras and stockings on the back of a chair; and partially obscured by the chair, a box of Tampax, under the sink.

He felt immensely pleased with himself sitting in a single girl's room while she prepared tea for him.

'That's a lot, isn't it? Where's your room?'

'Just below this one.'

'Really?' she said. 'I think I'll make a sandwich.'

'You can use some of my groceries.'

'I might if there are none left here.' She opened a drawer and picking out a blue notebook said: 'That looks like a rent book. It says £2.10.0 here.'

'It can't be,' he said, half rising from his chair. 'Might be an old book. Let me see.'

'No, it's current. It says Susan Williams on the cover. And'—flipping a few pages—'she has paid the rent for three weeks in advance.' She handed him the rent book.

'Isn't that strange? This room is exactly like mine. And I'm paying three guineas.'

'That's the colour tax one is always hearing about,' she said, putting bread slices under a gas flame. She opened another drawer and found a packet of meat patties.

He found her frankness refreshing: it was a change to hear an honest, unadulterated remark from an English person. He liked her. She was friendly and natural, unpaternalistic. He didn't mind taking her into his confidence. 'Sometimes I walk to my classes,' he told her. 'There's a short cut through the park. The Anglo-Asian Hostel was reasonable, but it was too far from the college. Now, after classes, I study in the library and walk back la—— I smell something burning.'

'It's the toast,' Mabel said, rushing from the dresser to the gas stove.

He got up and helped her set the table with an air of familiarity that surprised him; and yet when it came to asking her for something, he felt shy and awkward. 'Would you——' he began, but couldn't go on. She looked up. He looked down; and hastily brought his cup to his mouth. She too returned to her tea. 'Would you like to see another Indian film?' he managed to ask, his eyes still half shut.

'I'd like to . . . except, you see, this weekend I'm going home to Silvers Bar.' She saw his face shrink. 'I really liked the last film: the songs had very pleasant tunes.'

'That's why no Indian in this country is without a good radio or a record player.'

'Otherwise he'll feel spiritually starved, you mean.'

'Exactly,' he said cracking his knuckles. 'When is your birthday?'

'Fifteenth of April. Why?—when is yours?'

'It doesn't matter. We Indians attach no importance to birthdays.'

'You haven't eaten much. How about these patties?'

'I had one. Thank you.' He put his cup down, picked up a patty and began examining it

'What is it?'

'Do they have beef in them?' he asked anxiously.

'Yes. Why?'

The next moment, he was up on his feet, dashing to the sink, bending over, poking his throat with a Tampax, and vomiting noisily.

'I'm sorry,' she said, soothing his back. 'I really am. I didn't know.'

'That's all right,' he said in between his gargles. 'That's all right; it wasn't your fault.'

He returned to his chair wiping his mouth with his handkerchief.

'Want some more tea?' she asked him.

'Yes, please.'

He sipped in silence while she cleaned the sink.

'I must go now,' he said finishing his tea.

'Not before you've given me an injection.'

'Injection?'

'Why do you look surprised? Is it unusual for a doctor to give an injection?'

'But I'm not a doctor,' he said, puzzled. 'I'm an engineer, training to be an industrial manager.'

'I'm sorry. I don't know why, but whenever I see a young well dressed Indian I always think he's a doctor. I thought the same of Dev. It doesn't matter really; you can *still* give me an injection.'

'But I don't know how.'

'It's all very simple.'

'Are you——' he began, a little nervous at the thought. 'You are not a drug addict, or anything like that.'

'No,' she cried, laughing. 'Don't be alarmed. It's a hay-fever injection. I get hay-fever in the spring, when the pollen count is high; I must have an injection daily.'

'How do you manage otherwise?'

'I'm always with someone.'

'But——'

'But nothing,' she said persuasively, caressing his shoulder. 'It's the simplest thing in the world. I'll fix everything. All you've got to do is . . .' She took out the injection kit, put it in boiling water, filled the syringe and gave it to him.

'You better roll your sleeve all the way up,' he said, holding the syringe with both his hands.

'Not on my arm,' she said aloud. 'My buttock.'

He recoiled with shock, almost dropping the syringe, repeating incoherently, 'Butt——'

She was already lying on her belly, lifting her skirt, saying, 'No but, but. It has to be my buttock. Both my arms are sore carrying that blasted suitcase.'

He felt his heart thumping with delight and fear, his groin tensing at the sight of her lying down. He fixed his stare

on the floor as he rose to his feet, but seeing her white soft bottom he couldn't help caressing it.

'Now, now,' she croaked, 'you're like my doctor. There are professional ethics.'

He stopped caressing, rubbed methylated spirit on her buttock and lowered the syringe. He was feeling sick, but he jabbed the needle with all his will. She jerked a little, 'Ouch!' He closed his eyes, and with shaking hands pushed the plunger down. He pulled the needle out, opened his eyes. THUD! He fell on the floor, unconscious.

Arjun's cosy world had been assaulted once too often. First, his food; then his misadventure in search of a spiritual home. Now his sex life, or lack of it. He believed in virginity for himself until he had been married off when, of course, as a *grahasti*, a householder, he would copulate. But this hankering after copulation before marriage, to chalk up 'conquests', that was not for him. To him England was a launching pad for his career as a technocrat with Erikssons or some such firm in Bombay. Nothing more. He had no intention of marrying an English girl, so why bother? And he had stayed firmly on this line—until Mabel had appeared. Or, rather, fallen in his lap. She was certainly interested in him. And she lived just overhead. So near. The game was worth playing when the cards were stacked so heavily in his favour, he thought. He should invite her to a movie—if only he could catch her at a decent hour of the day; and knowing her daily movements, he excluded weekdays.

On Saturday morning, however, he could hear two people in the room above. It was probably a man, he feared. Later that afternoon, he heard Mabel's high pitched laugh on the landing. He peeped through the door of his room, and sure enough, he saw her descending the stairs with a man in blue jeans. He felt gloomy.

The next day he was aroused from his siesta by the sound of bed springs squeaking in the room above. He knew what

was going on. It disgusted him. He left the room and went to a park, wondering all along why he felt so upset. What was she to him? He saw a young couple on a bench locked in an awkward kiss, the boy's hand pressing the girl's thigh. What people! no sense of time and place. He tried to obliterate his thoughts of Mabel, but it was no use: he saw her in bed, stark naked, a man over her. He wished he were that man, giving her the right injection at the right place.

He went to a movie, an American Western, and returned late to his room. The room above was quiet. It remained quiet for the next few days. His college library reopened and he resumed his routine of studies in the library returning late, at night, to his room. But thoughts of Mabel persisted. He knew that the chances of getting a film date with her were slim, since she had a lover whom—he presumed—she loved exclusively. But he still would have liked to see her just to say 'Hello', if he could conjure up a valid reason.

He bought a sari at the Indian Handicraft Emporium thinking that it would be an ideal birthday present: her birthday was a few days away, but he had to give her the present before that, because, by then, she would have returned to Cheverly.

He knocked at her door the next evening. A girl with a big bosom and slightly buck teeth answered. 'Mabel,' she said, licking her teeth with her tongue. 'She's gone back to Cheverly. Did you want to——'

'No, nothing,' Arjun said tartly, putting the package under his arm, and left hastily.

She had wanted to march from Aldermaston to Trafalgar Square in support of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, but had done so only from High Wycombe; even that had left her exhausted; after the rally she had gone to Silvers Bar and rested for two days, and had then found herself out of her London apartment because of her friend's

unexpected return from France: Mabel told Dev all that at rapid fire speed. Then she asked him how big the march was at Cheverly.

'About fifty,' Dev replied.

'I bet you were the only foreigner.'

'The only coloured foreigner. There were two German students from the university, not that they looked foreign. You should have seen the number of pictures they took. The *Cheverly Free Press* must have used up at least two rolls of film.'

'Which will find their way to the Home Office, sooner or later.'

'I thought this was a free country.'

'Everything is relative: these are your words,' she said, and sneezed into her handkerchief. 'Excuse me. Can't we go and have tea in the park canteen?'

They walked slowly to the canteen, Dev trying to hold her hand which kept slipping out.

'When is the Anti-Apartheid march?' he enquired, as he handed her a cup of tea.

'May 31st: that's their Republic Day. But I won't march.'

'Afraid of the Home Office?'

'No, afraid of not finishing my thesis in time. I'm way behind in my schedule. I have so much information to collect—through statistical techniques, whatever they are.'

'I know what they are. I'll assist you if you want me to.'

'That'll be nice. Thanks. I could do with some help. Well, this is the plan: prepare a questionnaire, choose families at random from the voters' register of working class wards, get questionnaires filled, analyse answers, then——'

'Why don't you interview my landlady for a start?' he broke in. 'Her name itself is typical: Mrs Smith. And talk of telly, she has it on even when we're eating.'

'Not a bad idea, specially when you can fill me in on her personal background.'

Dev arranged the interview for a Sunday afternoon when all the other lodgers were expected to be away.

Mrs Smith's son, however, insisted on being present, and Mrs Smith, as usual, went on describing her son's amorous exploits. 'He keeps a courting diary. Which girl on which day. So we'd know which baby is his,' she said with a chuckle. 'Now don't you get involved with girls,' she said, turning to her son. 'You're too young to marry. Them girls'd do anything to get a ring.'

'No, Mum,' the son said, 'I only go out with *nice* girls.'

Mabel drew back her head, as if insulted.

'You know Tom's girl-friend? She's expecting a baby,' Mrs Smith said. 'And her mother is cussing and swearing like a trooper.'

'He's the drinking type.'

'Now, you stay away from that habit, luv.'

'Only a pint or two, Mum; now and then.'

'That won't do no harm, as long as you keep it within limits.' Then Mrs Smith said, 'I'll get some tea.' She went to the kitchen.

Her son began reading a copy of the questionnaire. 'Are we working class, Mum?' he asked as his mother returned with a tray.

'We ain't working class no more,' Mrs Smith declared, raising her chin, tray in hand. Mabel winced; Dev smiled. 'We're middle class. You don't work with your hands like your father, do you?'

'No, Mum,' the son replied, stirring his tea. 'But, to tell you the truth, Mum, I don't like my job. I mean . . . I mean there's no future for a sales assistant in a pet shop.'

'What do you want to do then?'

'I don't know, maybe I'll go into the army. My old man was a soldier before he worked in a bakery.'

'Now don't be so hasty about it.'

'I've to sign up for the National Service anyway. Now I'll sign up for seven years. Tom signed up a few months ago, and he says it's all right.'

'Now don't be so hasty about it.'

Mrs Smith's son left, sulking.

Mabel and Dev began filling in the questionnaire.

It soon became their joint venture—filling in forms, collating information, summarizing.

Dev worked with her often and for long hours at the university library, at her digs. He found this comradeship refreshing, a throwback to his college days, but the company then had been all male, technical colleges being barren of girls. Now, in the company of Mabel, the male in him kept protruding, seeing, slyly, in this coventure of theirs, a key to her bedroom. She welcomed his help, enjoyed his company; but his sexual overtures she shunned. Depending on his mood, he sulked or argued; but the door of her bedroom moved not an inch.

A vague notion was growing in his mind that behind her obstinacy there lurked a fear: he was to her, still, a man without a setting, *a tree trunk in a barren land*.

'I'm afraid of you,' she said to him once, gently, sadly. 'I never know what you'll do next.'

'I won't tickle your arse, that's for sure,' he said with a chuckle. 'I'm no Eton boy.'

'I wouldn't like it if you were one.'

'Will I see you once you're settled in London with your new job?'

'Of course. Why do you ask?'

Mabel found Arjun's kindness overwhelming even though she did not quite know what to do with a sari. One evening, after work, instead of taking a tube to her flat in North London she boarded a tube going west. She knocked at Arjun's room and was greeted by a stocky young man in baggy trousers who flashing a 100-watt smile said, 'I'm Tiwari. Tiwari, the cartoonist. All the main dailies have their staff cartoonists, that's why you don't see my name in papers.'

'Is Mr Aswani——' Mabel began.

'Ah, Mr Aswani! Yes, the room is still in his name, I'm

only a caretaker. You know how it is, so hard for us people to get rooms.'

'Is he in?'

'No, no. Didn't he tell you? He's on the Continent, Scandinavian countries. That man has great future ahead of him,' Tiwari said, putting the tips of his fingers together. 'There's bright future in India for engineers and industrial managers, not much for cartoonists.'

'Thank you very much.' Mabel was already on her way down.

'Any message?' Tiwari shouted, leaning over the banister of the landing.

'Shut up!'

To be precise, Arjun was at that moment with Dev in his bedsitting room at Mac's guest house, telling him how, to the astonishment of his class mates, he had topped the list at the exams and broken previous departmental records as well.

'I hope your professor no longer thinks we get our degrees in India by worshipping cows, or by standing on our heads in a 100-degree shade,' Dev said. He lit a cigarette and offered one to Arjun.

'That's one thing I'll never try, not even once.'

'What takes you to Sweden?'

'Erikssons. They've arranged a training job for me with one of their principals.'

'Sweden, a heaven for bachelors. Don't disappoint the girls.'

'If they understand me.'

'Sign language will do.'

'Or alpha-numerical,' Arjun said, cracking his knuckles. 'Like triple M?'

'Triple M?' Dev repeated. 'How did you know . . . Mabel's middle name starts with an M.'

'Didn't she tell you that she lived just above my room, in London? During Easter holidays.'

'No, she didn't.'

'The way she carried on.'

'Speak English, man,' Dev said sharply, feeling a stab of jealousy. 'What do you mean?'

'Just what I said.'

'With whom?'

'Not me,' Arjun smiled.

Dev stubbed out his cigarette. 'Well, what else to expect?' he said with an air of resignation.

'It's rare to find a virgin over twenty-one: so the Kinsey report says.'

'I didn't know the Kinsey report interested you.'

'In the name of science . . .'

Have you read the Kinsey report—would make an appropriate opening for his conversation with Mabel, Dev thought. And she would probably reply I *am* the Kinsey report. She could be blunt if she chose to. And enormously enthusiastic: she had such vigour for living.

'I *feel* useful now,' she told Dev in London. 'For the first time in my life I feel useful.' Already a seasoned traveller in the course of her job with Handicapped Children's Homes she thought of a scooter trip to Oxford as one more jaunt, exciting, sun-tanning but—as she later realized—back-breaking.

'Let's go and lie down on the banks of Cherwell,' she said, 'before I grow a hunch-back.' She led Dev to the lawns of Magdalen.

They lay quietly, side by side, he with a newspaper over his face, she with dark glasses on. Then she got up, took out an apple from her handbag, polished it against her beige skirt, and took a few quick bites.

'There's one thing good about this job,' she began. 'When you're meeting people with problems all the time your own problems just fade away.' She spit an apple-seed. 'Whatever happened to Mrs Smith's son?'

'The other day I saw him in an Army uniform at Woolworths. He seemed very proud of it.'

'Poor boy! That's what's so depressing about it—parents'

disinterest in their children. They'd much rather have a few pounds a week *now* than look ahead.'

'And in my community parents would mortgage their property to send their sons to university.'

'East and West,' she said abstractly. 'Like the banks of a river. You think they meet down somewhere there, but they never really do.' She chewed her apple silently for a while, then said, 'Where do you stand?'

'In the middle,' he replied, and stood up.

'Sinking or swimming?'

'Neither. Learning to walk on water.'

'You know what's the trouble with you,' she said looking up through her dark glasses. 'You're like a slippery eel.'

'Either that or your hooks are not sharp enough,' he said, and began drifting away.

'They're sharp enough.' She threw the apple core in the river and got up, dusting her skirt.

They paced over the grass silently, reflecting, walking toward the college gate. Just before they entered the quadrangle she said to him, 'I'm sorry. I'm exhausted. And I'm hungry.'

'Somewhere I saw a good old Lyons.'

They were just settling down at a table when Mabel saw two Indian women in saris entering.

'Such gorgeous colours!' she said. 'And how graceful they look!'

'How squarish!' he said. 'They're so small to start with, and then the wrap-around . . . it reduces them further.'

'Don't you like saris?'

'I like what emphasizes female contours. And a sari doesn't.'

'You do have strange ideas,' she said, embarrassingly aware of her flat breasts. 'Your friend Arjun sent me a sari as a birthday present.'

'Oh, did he?' Dev said, jabbing a potato chip with his fork. 'How did he know your address?'

'He didn't. That's the surprising part of it. He was

obviously put off by that for some time, but then just before he went off to the Continent he posted it to me care of the Students Union and they redirected it to Silvers Bar. Rather ingenious of Arjun, don't you think?'

'Quite,' Dev said reluctantly. 'He's stuck on you.'

'He looks so virginal.'

'A standing challenge to sex adventurers.'

'A sex adventurer?' she shouted, putting down her fork and knife noisily. 'So that's what you think I am?'

'Prompleese...' he mumbled through his full mouth, wishing to say: Promiscuous.

'We're through!' she flashed. And picking up her handbag she walked away with a swagger.

'Women!'

It all had to do with the long scooter ride Mabel had, Dev thought. It had tired her out, made her snappy. A scooter was not the best magnet to attract girls with, or having attracted them to hold them with. He would have to buy a car. And when an office colleague of his mentioned selling his pre-war model car Dev bought it. There and then.

Suddenly he realized that there were a lot of smiling, nodding faces at Mac's Guest House. His car became a passport to popularity. But a costly one. So he became business-like, insisted on charging money in advance for trips to be made, and finally settled with a puny English clerk (with a proper driving licence) and a hefty German trainee to run the car jointly.

A balmy summer stretched ahead of them.

Tony could not recall a sunnier summer since the time he had come to England. Seeds seemed to sprout in his back garden the same day he put them in the soil. His own seed in Monica might be striking roots, he thought with a joyous excitement as he waited impatiently under the awning of a hardware store. A sudden cloud burst over Kempton had impeded his walk from Marks and Spencers to the free car

park. He was sure Monica would have returned from the gynaecologist's. The rain stopped.

He called out 'Monica' as soon as he put his key in the lock of his home. 'Monica!' He dropped his shopping bags in the hallway.

'I'm here!' came a cry from the bedroom.

He found Monica drying her hair with a towel in front of the dresser. 'I got soaked,' she grumbled.

'Tell me, tell me,' Tony said, excited. 'What did he say?' 'Who?'

'The gynaecologist, who else?'

'The test is positive,' she replied, and went on wringing her hair with the towel.

'What does that mean?' he asked, abruptly. 'Are you pregnant, are you not?'

'I am.'

'Woohee!' he shouted. In an instant he had her lifted in his muscular arms, thrown up in the air, then resting in his arms again; he nuzzling her ear, shouting, 'My child! You're going to have my child' while she struggled helplessly, pushing his face away, protesting, 'Let go! Let me go! You're smothering me!'

Puzzled and hurt, he put her back on the stool. 'Aren't you happy?'

She picked up a hair brush and began brushing her hair. A heavy, portentous silence lay between them. His effervescence was dying down.

She said, weakly, 'I don't want it.'

'What?' He stood there, dead in his tracks, paralyzed. A married woman, *his* married woman, not wanting a child: this was unbelievable, absolutely unbelievable.

'You heard me.'

'Did I hear my wife say she doesn't want a child, a God's gift?'

'God's gift,' she repeated slowly, bitterly. 'The piousness. That's something about Catholics which makes me retch.'

'Are we starting that again?' Suddenly he felt tired. He

wished he were at the golf course, playing with his boss. He feared that the sediment of hatred and acrimony that had preceded their marriage would come up once again. It had been a major battle between him and Monica's Anglican parents. Caught unaware in the crossfire, Monica had sided with him—all the way. But as the crisis had ebbed her parents had managed to reclaim her.

'When did we stop?' she asked.

One could cut a bar of steel with that tone of hers, he thought. He was no match for her in that. He had come to that conclusion early in his marriage. 'I hope you realize you're a Catholic yourself,' he tried to shame her. He sat down.

'I went through the motions, yes. I wasn't born one, thank God. But you were a Catholic when we were courting, weren't you? You didn't mind the rubber then.'

He had expected this taunt, and it had come. He knew his line. They had rehearsed the script often enough. '*That* was an affair; *this* is marriage,' he said like a judge. 'And people marry, at least Catholics marry, to raise a family. That's what we should be doing.'

'Speak for yourself, I want to get...' she trailed off shaking her head.

'For God's sake, speak up.'

'I've said it. Get rid of it.'

He felt as if a boulder had hit his skull and smashed it. For several seconds he was too stunned for words. 'Murder! That's murder!'

'Abortion is the word.'

'Murder in the Catholic view. And I'm a Catholic,' he said, getting up, angered. 'Besides, it's illegal here. Illegal. It's a crime. I won't have it.'

'You don't really have it. I have it,' she said, rubbing her belly with the hairbrush. 'There are countries in Europe where it's legal...'

He was too full of rage to hear what she was saying. He knew that if he stayed there longer he would turn the dresser

on its side and push her over it. 'Bitch! You bitch!' he shouted, and banged the door as he left. 'Murderer!'

Within a few fuming moments he was on the road in his station-wagon, speeding and braking and crashing gears. He almost ran over a woman at the corner of Harrow Road and Plough Street. He should have had his lights on in that pouring rain. He pulled over and got out. The woman was brushing off her muddied handbag.

'Pamela!' Tony cried. 'What a way to meet again? I'm sorry.'

Pamela was still dazed. Slowly, she said, 'That's all right. It was really my fault. I was too engrossed in my own little thoughts.'

'Can I give you a lift?'

'I don't want to inconvenience you.'

'Not at all.'

She got in his station-wagon feeling rather self-conscious. 'If you could drop me at the Odeon, please.'

'With pleasure.'

'How's Monica?'

'She's fine: she's expecting a baby.'

'How wonderful!'

'No, no,' Tony countered nervously. 'I mean we don't know yet. Not confirmed, not yet. Do you hear from Dev?'

'He stopped writing.'

'Hasn't he visited you since he left?'

'Visited?' Pamela asked with knitted eyebrows. 'Why should he?'

'Well, I thought . . . you know . . . Well, here's. That's Odeon.'

Pamela got off. She had an uneasy feeling that Ray had his eyes focussed on her the moment he saw her slide open the door of Tony's station-wagon.

'Who's he?' Ray asked her, rather sharply. 'He looked Indian.'

'You act as if you saw me with Al Capone. He's a very respectable engineer married to a rich English girl.'

'And he shows it too. That flashy station-wagon!'

Dev's car had a battered look but its heart was in excellent condition. Steered by Dev it ran from one end of the country to another without a hint of fatigue. Once clutched by nostalgia Dev went to Kempton along with his protesting car partners who kept mentioning the cathedral at Whitlsby.

'All right,' Dev said finally compromising. 'Let's have some coffee here. Then you can take the car. We'll meet here in the evening, the same café.'

The puny clerk nodded agreement.

'But I'd like to park without your comments, for a change,' Dev told him. 'So why don't you go into the café while I find the space and park?'

The puny clerk and the hefty German trainee got out.

Dev found a space, made a perfect parking manoeuvre and began straightening his car careful not to hit the car in the back but ended up bumping against a Morris in the front, and jolting, forward, the girl sitting in it. She put down the newspaper she had been reading; Dev got out of his car.

At the girl's car, Dev stooped to apologise: 'Oh, hello!' Pamela said.

'For a moment I thought you were wearing a paper veil,' he said lightly. 'That's a nice car you've got.'

'Not mine, my boy-friend's.'

'Is John back then?'

'John who?'

'Tomlinson.'

'Oh yes,' she said, insipidly. 'No, I mean. He's still in Calcutta. He likes it there.'

'Better to rule in hell than serve in heaven.'

'So you've chosen to serve in heaven,' she said, patting her hair nervously. 'But you'll always be an outsider, if you don't mind my saying so.'

'It doesn't really matter now. It did, when I first arrived.'

There seemed to be a promise in the air which never came off.'

'You too make false promises, you know,' she said, indulgently. 'You said you'll see it in writing. And all I saw was an account of your falling off the scooter. That certainly hadn't happened when you made the promise.'

'Well, this is getting interesting,' he said. 'How about some tea with me?'

'Thanks for asking me, but I'd rather not. He's very jealous.'

'He's got a name?'

'What's that to you?' she said, rather snappishly, as she threw a quick look at the car mirror. 'I see him coming.'

'Best of luck with your master,' he said, straightening up, and left.

Pamela opened her powder compact and started applying lipstick hurriedly.

Ray sat in the driver's seat, then said, 'I thought I saw you talking to an Indian again.'

'You'll see me talking to lamp posts next.'

Dev phoned Tony's number at different times, but the response was always the same. The phone rang and rang, but no one picked it up. They might be on holiday, Dev speculated, and went off to Bruce's flat by the river.

'Yes, they're away,' Bruce said, sliding up his glasses. 'They went away all too suddenly, left me hanging on that house business.'

'Your place is quiet.'

'The kids are gone to the matinee; my wife is at the laundromat. And I'm decorating this hovel,' Bruce said with sweeping gesture, a hammer in hand. He struck a nail in the wall of his living room and hung a Woolworth print of a Highlands landscape. 'I think your friend is in trouble.'

'What trouble?'

'Serious,' he said, enigmatically, 'at least for them, anyway.'

'You've got me interested.'

'This is a gossipy little town,' Bruce dragged on. 'You should not believe all that you hear, anyway.'

'Can I hear what you've heard?'

'I hear they're in Denmark... for an abortion.'

'Abortion? What abortion?' Dev asked, confused, unbelieving. 'But they're Catholics; don't you know?'

'That's why I said serious trouble.'

'But why?' Dev said, more to himself than to Bruce. 'They're a married couple.'

'Your guess is as good as mine.' Bruce gave a stiff smile. 'What do you guess?'

'I guess... I guess... I don't believe it.'

'They say a white bloke is the father.'

'A white bloke?' Dev repeated abstractly. 'Oh... that way. Racial.'

'Anyway, I don't blame poor Tony. He had little choice. Either abortion now or humiliation for the rest of his life.'

Who could the father be, Dev felt an itch to speculate; but not before Bruce. His Hindu mind would not let him discuss with someone else the infidelities of his friend's wife.

Back in Delhi, Dev's father had been advised to undergo an operation for what ailment his mother did not say. Then she went on, 'You're the light of the family, and we have high hopes in you that you will make us prosperous... When will you come home? My son, I've found a girl for you to marry. Her father will give a lot of dowry...' In the meantime, he should continue paying his periodic tributes to his parents in pound notes, Dev thought, fretting.

PART THREE

Chapter Nine

As summer waned foreign accents and words at Mac's guest house tapered off, losing the air to grammar school accents. By mid October the place was full with university students, some old, some new, yet all effusively enthusiastic about the first grand ball at the Union Hall. This was music to Dev's ears.

On the fateful Saturday Dev got the car battery recharged and fixed it himself. In the evening he removed the "L" plates and, with his mind pulsating with romantic thoughts, he set out for the Union Hall.

Damn it, no lights! The next moment his car went dead. He was puzzled. He checked and rechecked the dashboard, the switches, the gears. He turned the ignition key. Nothing happened. He took out the starting handle and began cranking. Still no luck: not a spark of life. He walked.

The Union Hall was bursting at its seams, young men and women perched on window sills. Dev deliberated: there was so much to choose from. He felt attracted by her posture, the way she sat on a chair staring awkwardly at the floor. He asked her for a dance. She rose, a tall figure of grace. They gave each other a sweeping glance of appraisal—the kind viewers give to statues and paintings—and liked what they saw.

A clear smooth skin, a long craning neck, a straight sharp nose and dark brown eyes gave her the kind of wholesome appearance that Dev had always associated with soap and shampoo models portrayed in glossy magazines. But she

was alive—real enough to ask him: 'What are you studying?'

'I'm not studying nothing,' he replied. She winced. 'According to my little philosophy, there are two classes of people: workers and shirkers.' She gave a toothpaste-ad smile. 'I consider myself a worker, the one who sweats for a living. By the same token, I presume you to be a shirker.'

'But even shirking needs a lot of work.'

'A clever statement, but contradictory in terms. Perhaps, you'd like to enlighten me on its true meaning over a drink.'

'Yes, but not an alcoholic one. We're instructed to stay away from it.'

'Suits my pocket, though not my taste.'

They left the hall for the common room upstairs. The sofas and chairs were so low you whispered the moment you sat down. They sat down. She sipped her orangeade, then asked him his name.

'Dev,' he replied, moving closer to her on the sofa.

'No, I mean your *real* name.'

'That's the real one, and is spelled D-e-v. It's a complete name, not a short form.'

'How intriguing and distinctive.'

'Only in the beginning. Novelty has its gloss.'

'That sounds a bit cynical.'

'With time we all grow cynical. A bit of cynicism is good though: it helps one to be objective.' The sudden wave of seriousness drowned his earlier thought of asking her her name.

'May I ask what work you do? I mean sweating,' she said, wiping imaginary sweat-beads off her brow.

'I draw lines and circles on paper, and get paid for it. When I'm not working, I look for Miss Right. I looked for her in my country everywhere: in the fields and forests, parks and plazas, under the beds, over the roofs, but failed to find her. In desperation I crossed the seven seas to continue the search. Once, while dancing, I met her; but then she spelt her name, W-r-i-g-h-t. I felt heartbroken.'

'How terrible!' she said mock-seriously.

'But after a late dinner at a Chinese restaurant I felt better. We all feel better after a sumptuous meal. Perhaps, you'd like to enjoy that feeling some evening.'

'I think I would,' she said after a brief reflection. 'You've sold me the idea.'

'Which evening——'

'There you are!' a small red-haired girl appeared suddenly shouting, 'Come on! We've to run to beat the curfew.'

Dev's girl leaped to her feet.

'Which evening would be ...' Dev said aloud: his girl was already a few yards away. She said something: he didn't quite understand. 'What's your name?' he asked, jumping up.

Hill-broad-something, is what he heard.

'I'm Dev Raj Verma, phone 38246,' he cried and began striding to follow his girl. BANG! He hit a body. Splash! A girl's white dress dripped with beer; her hand quivered, holding an empty mug. 'Sorry, sorry,' he said, flustered. The girl stared at him, angry and confused. 'I'll pay, pay the laundry charges,' he offered. He saw her eyes shining with tears. He fled.

It was only after he had retired to bed that his thoughts returned to his girl of the evening. He tried to recall her name. He couldn't. He raked his memory but all he could be sure of was that her Christian name started with an H, and that her surname began with Bread, Broad or Brad. She was most probably a training college girl since the university girls were allowed to stay until the dance ended. Which evening was he to see her?

On Monday evening, he thought of going to the Chinese restaurant but his Mondayish lethargy and the rain outside made him stay back.

On Tuesday evening he went, thinking they were to meet at eight. When she hadn't arrived by eight-thirty, he thought the appointment was for eight-thirty. It had to be

the Blue Dragon since that was the only Chinese restaurant in the city centre. He waited until nine. No luck.

Wednesday evening was the same: an hour long ordeal in the cold. The longer he waited for her, the more attractive she became to him, more worth waiting for. His anger at his car returned: if it hadn't failed him, he would have given his girl a lift to her college, and there would have been none of the mess. But it was really his fault—connecting the battery the wrong way around.

While waiting for her on Thursday a brilliant idea struck him. He rushed to his room. He wrote down the names starting with 'H': Hazel, Helen, Hilda, Hilary. For surnames, he looked up the local telephone directory: Bradbee, Bradfelt, Bradfield . . . ten of them—too many. He picked five surnames and formed various combinations: Hazel Bradfield, Hazel Bradman . . . twenty of them in all. Two training colleges.

Making forty phone calls from the guest house call-box would look ridiculous: he had better use a public phone. He had better draw lots instead of running through the list in a given sequence. He spent all Friday afternoon scribbling names.

He drew the first lot—Hilda Broadbridge—and phoned a training college. 'Hold on,' the voice said. Silence for two minutes. 'Sorry, sir, there's nobody with that name on our list.'

The same reply from the other training college.

He noticed two women waiting outside the kiosk. He drew the next lot, and when the response was negative, asked for a slight variation of the first name: still 'No.' Three women waiting. He came out, and rushed to the next nearest call-box, hundred and fifty pennies tearing his coat pocket, and dialled. Line busy. But he kept on.

He was on his ninth name when he heard, 'Hold on, she'll be with you in a minute.' After all!

'Hello, Hazel Bradman speaking'—the voice was flat and scratchy, not at all like 'hers'.

'This is Dev, the Indian boy you met at the dance,' he said, excited.

'What?' she cried. 'What Indian boy?'

He threw the receiver down as if it were burning coal, and stepped out, but did not give up. He kept on until the training college switchboards were turned off for the night. Nothing doing.

It was much later, in the cosiness of his room, that he realized the excess of his panic. The next university hop was just a day away, and 'his girl' was likely to be there.

And she was, looking rather cross. 'What happened?' he asked.

'You're asking me,' she said waspishly. 'I waited at the Blue Dragon for half an hour on Monday. It was raining and I caught a virus. It hasn't left me yet, not completely.'

'Oh, no, not on Monday I never go out on Mondays.'

'But that's what I said when I was leaving.'

'I didn't hear you well. It was all so hectic.' Already his tone was apologetic 'Well, if you waited for one evening, I waited for two, Tuesday and Wednesday.' She smiled. 'Now first things first: please write your name and address here,' he said handing her a diary and a pencil. 'All in capital letters.'

'HELEN BRADBURY, ANSELEN'S COLLEGE.'

Wish I had chosen Bradbee instead of Bradman, he thought. 'Bradbee and Bradbury sound so alike,' he half murmured.

'What did you say?' she asked, touching an ear lobe.

'Nothing. How about a date?' She turned meditative. 'How about next Friday?'

'It's Friday the thirteenth, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'I'm superstitious.'

'Madam, a blue dragon gobbles up all superstitions,' he said, bowing, Chinese waiter style.

At the Blue Dragon Helen slipped off her camel colour coat without his help. Under the shiny black stretch of her

dress, her body moved with the poise of a peacock, her hair, kind of light ginger that evening, bundled in a large bun at the back of her head. He was proud to be seen walking with her, deliciously aware of the jealous glances he had aroused from the men in the restaurant. Sitting opposite her he felt dazed by her pink and white face, vivacious, radiant: she had scored forty out of forty points he normally allocated to the physical aspect of a girl. How did she see him, in what perspective? There was no familiar perspective in which she could have placed him, he had realized that. And so, to help her, he would build a perspective around himself, plant a few shrubs and trees around *the tree trunk in the barren land* that he was. He had come equipped, that evening: he had the pictures of his family members—father, mother, sisters, brother—with him. And, one by one, he introduced them to her, placing special stress on his father (much younger and handsomer than he was then) and his prettiest sister. He could see the barometer of her esteem for him rise picture by picture. ‘I’ll show you the pictures of my family next time,’ she said. So there would be a next time, he thought, immensely pleased.

‘It has been a headache trying to find a novelist to write an essay on,’ she said, opening her cigarette packet, and offering him one.

He accepted it, thinking that *was* equality of sexes: first taking off her coat on her own, then offering him a cigarette.

She lit her cigarette, then said, ‘The trouble is there are so many of them, and they’re all so good.’

‘Why not try someone unusual?’

‘Like?’

‘Jean Webster. She wrote the famous *Daddy Long Legs*. I read its sixty-seventh printing, and enjoyed it very much.’

‘Maybe I’ve read it. Can you tell me what it’s about?’

‘It shows the development of an American orphan into a mature woman, and a writer. All this is done through a series of letters.’

‘Sounds extraordinary.’

‘Talk of extraordinary, and adolescent: it reminds me of James Joyce. I liked his *Stephen Hero*.’

‘Never heard of him. What was his novel about?’

‘The novel—if one may call it that—is about his early youth in Dublin, and his slow drift from family, country and even his faith. As a student of a Catholic training college you may not like it,’ he said, smiling.

‘I guess it’s good to hear different viewpoints.’

Different variations of the same theme or different themes altogether—was the question that rose in his mind. But he was undecided whether to let it out: luckily the waiter arrived bringing his chow mein and her egg-foo-yung. ‘Do you watch the telly?’ Dev asked.

‘Only on Thursday,’ the waiter replied, bowing. ‘My half day.’ Dev and Helen smiled as if they were sharing a common secret. Dev liked that: it made him feel nearer to her.

‘Not much,’ she replied. ‘My father is an addict though. Sometimes he tries to watch programmes on both channels. Do you?’

‘Watch programmes on both channels?’ he asked, teasing her with an assurance that usually comes with intimacy.

‘No. Watch television, I mean.’

‘Rarely. Most programmes are so mediocre. There are some exceptions though, that programme on Feiffer and his cartoons . . .’ he trailed off, shoving food in his mouth.

‘Yes, I like his subtle humour. That way I think he’s more English than American.’

‘They were going around asking opinions about the telly, and an old man replied: if you close your eyes, it’s as good as the wireless.’

Helen burst out laughing. It was a clean laugh like the sound of a bell. He liked her laughing, her creamy skin stretched over her high cheekbones, her white teeth gleaming in the light. In that instant a revelation struck him: she was *the* girl he had been searching for all along. It was

an exulting, effusive revelation: it gave his subsequent actions a dreamlike quality.

He drove past Anselem College on Barton High Road, then turned left into a bylane that stood in the long shadow of the granite college wall. In the stillness of the autumn night, the two of them together, her face turned toward him, half-expectant, lips slightly parted, eyes wide and candid: his arms encircled her shoulders and their lips met, his glasses getting fogged with her breath, his mind giddy with a feeling that they were on the verge of an exciting future together.

To believe that the future is something one reaches at the rate of sixty minutes an hour is to ignore the nature of time. For time is a ball that bounces up and down, a pendulum that swings; time is a balloon with a deadweight, a bird on its wings. Time stops, walks, runs and flies. For Dev it had stopped, walked and run, but never before had it flown. Now it did. *His* time with Helen flew. And after he had seen her step out of his car, throw a 'God bless you!' in the air, stoop hurriedly through the college gate and disappear in the mellow autumn night, *his* time stopped. Then he would unwind it backward, backward, recovering the soft slippery touch of her milky nape, the smell of her perfume, the flutter of her speech, the sight of her oval face laughing, vivified; his mind savouring the flavour of her anecdotes about her shrivelled grandmother, with whom, as a child, she shared a room; and a shell-shocked godfather who before the war was, like her father, a miner, but, who now unable to hold a job, rented a donkey on a beach.

'You know he can call the spirits,' she told Dev once with a mixture of wonder and censure. 'He holds his seances in a bright parlour with scatter cushions and lamps. It's really weird. But I haven't seen him do it. My mother wouldn't let me.'

'Does he really believe in spirits?'

'I suppose so. He says the war shattered his old beliefs. He's a fallen Catholic, really.'

What's a fallen Catholic, Dev wondered, like a fallen woman? Instead he said, rather lamely, 'I can read hands.'

She offered him a long-fingered hand: 'Will you read mine, please?'

'For a small fee,' he replied. 'If you come out with me tomorrow.'

'But tomorrow is a Sunday. I go riding.'

'Horses?'

'No! I can't even ride a pony, much less a horse. I go cycling every Sunday. My keep-fit exercise.'

'You don't need exercise. You *are* fit. You look lovely, just lovely.'

'Thank you,' she said, kissing him on the cheek. 'You know what Juno did to my room mate?'

'Who's Juno?'

'Our Fuehrer, the Mother Superior. She has the most blatant moustache I've ever seen on a woman's face. She confined my room mate for three weekends just because she returned five minutes after the curfew.'

'That's cruel.'

'Absolutely.'

'Are you going to do something about it?'

'Just suffer in silence; what else? You grow up with it if you've been to Catholic schools all your life, as I've been,' she said rather nonchalantly. She was quiet for a while, nervously rotating her bangle around the flesh of her arm, then said, 'We'll smoke more often in our rooms, something we're not allowed to do at all. But we have a problem: how to keep the smoke from floating away into the corridors. And you never know when a nun is gliding by. They walk ever so quietly; all you can hear is their robes brushing the floor, if you're careful.'

'Sounds like an army barrack.'

'And feels like a prison.'

'I pity your room mate.'

How would he feel if he were imprisoned in his guest house for three weekends in a row... the thought was too

gloomy to entertain. There had been enough gloom and frustration in his life. Now at last his life was brightening—within the narrow medieval limits set by the nunnery of Anselem's: the curfew hour was 9.30 p.m. on weekdays, 10 p.m. on Fridays and Sundays, and 11 p.m. on Saturdays. It was a wonder the nuns did not dress the Anselem girls in chastity belts before letting them out for dates. Perhaps they did. He had had no chance to explore Helen's body to find out. His car had not proved the cosy blanket for love making he had hoped. After all, loving could only come at the end of an evening which had to be filled with eating, talking, dancing or watching film. It took time to rouse Helen to a sexual pitch where a move to the back seat of his car would seem natural, not forced. And time was at a great premium if Helen had to be saved the penalty of 'confinement'. He would have to start early, very early, during daytime.

He arranged to pick her up one Saturday afternoon, after her shopping, outside the central library.

She had hardly stepped into his car when he said with a sudden (but premeditated) alarm, 'My goodness, the library books are due today.' He sent his car in motion with such urgency that she even forgot to lock her door properly.

They reached Mac's guest house.

He wanted her to come to his room, but how was he to bring this about? All the excuses he had conjured up in his mind before, suddenly, appeared silly and contrived. Furthermore, what if she refused outright. But she could not refuse *or* agree until and unless he asked.

'Perhaps you'd pay me a call,' he said, subdued. 'During the daytime,' he added feeling foolish and brave.

'Perhaps,' she said dryly, looking straight through the windshield.

He leaped out of his car and opened her door with a bell-boy's speed. His steps were jaunty, his mind in flutter, but his room on the top floor was tidy, orderly.

'The books!' he repeated like a puppet.

She understood what he wanted. And, amused and curious, she plopped herself in his heavy armchair, unasked. He opened his wardrobe and began moving his books, putting them on his bare desk in little columns. 'That's the whole lot, mine, library's,' he said, dusting his hands.

She was busy flipping through a book in her hand.

'There's Stephen Daedalus,' he said, picking up a copy of 'Stephen Hero'. 'Let me read you this... "He was egotistically determined that nothing material, no favour or reverse of fortune, no bond of association or impulse or tradition should hinder him from working out the engima of his position in his own way".'

'Sounds interesting. Let me see,' she said stretching her arm.

Slowly, definitely, his room began to carry her imprint. She brought him a hand carved Victorian book shelf from an antique shop. And a clothes rack. She cajoled him into buying furniture polish one Saturday. He used it, grumbling about Mac, 'the negligent landlord', yet happy in the thought that she was becoming a part of his life, and he of hers. She adored flowers, and brought a bunch, once, to his room.

'Where'll you put them?' he asked. 'There's no vase here.'

'Never mind,' she said, and went striding down.

She returned with a milk bottle filled with water.

'The desk rocks,' he said.

She folded her cigarette packet, used it as a wedge and brought the desk to rest. Absolute rest. Then she moved the flowers from one end of the desk to another, stepping back, her hands clasped near her chin, pondering, a standing Prometheus, viewing them from all angles and perspectives, finally placing them near the edge, off centre, in the weak wintry sunlight from the window.

'You need a tablecloth,' she told him.

He liked it, a girl, so attractive and energetic as Helen, making a fuss of his room, taking care.

Then she went to the window, pushed it open, and took a few deep breaths. She was bringing freshness in his life.

Their life. And their life swung between Mac's guest house and Anselem Hall, an arc of two miles. The door of his room was open to her any time, all times, but the gate of Anselem, well, the only male allowed in was the gardener. All he could do, did do, was to lean against its high wall with Helen leaning against him, for a few fleeting minutes before the guillotine of curfew fell.

'Nosie, nosie; bump, bump,' she would say, rubbing noses and bumping foreheads.

'Ah, the good old days of childhood.'

'You're a positive pet.'

'I'll try to be a negative tep.'

'You're impossible.'

'Is it possible to be impossible?' Then he regarded her eyes in the street light, and said, 'Is it possible to have dark brown eyes one day, deep blue the other and hazel next?'

'It's the contact lenses.'

'Do you wear glasses?' he asked, appalled at the idea of spectacles on such a beautiful face

'No! They're decorative.'

'You must be rich.'

'They didn't cost me a penny, you know I was selected the Beauty Queen of my county, Blackshire. Last year.'

Dev wolf-whistled.

'Sssh! Manners,' she said with mock severeness. 'I was crowned and all that. They also gave me £100 which I had to use for "beautifying" myself.'

'And you chose contact lenses. Unique Like that posture of yours in the dance hall.'

'What posture?' she asked, wide eyed.

'The way you sat in a chair staring at the dance floor,' he said: he sat in an imaginary chair and demonstrated.

'It was your bedroom eyes that I fell for.'

'Bedroom eyes,' he chuckled.

There had been moments in bed between Helen and the
They had been in love; they had
their bodies too warm for

clothes, engaged in an all-in wrestling. His love would rise cocked, turgid, seeking the target that lay within her, the warm sanctuary; but she would deny it to him, she would keep him out. This was the rule of the wrestle-in, the love-in, that she had set; and he played according to her rule, ever hopeful. For, he knew, she was a player and referee too: she participated in the wrestle-in, and yet she was her own overseer, her own outer eye. It seemed, to him, an impossible duality to maintain in harness. But she managed rather well. Time after time. With each success, however, as her confidence in herself grew, the strength of her outer eye waned slowly, imperceptibly. And, one rainy evening, with her outer eye snugly slackened, she surrendered to her player's instinct without restraint, without bar, giving and taking, rhythmically, convulsively, ecstatically, her body a receptacle of his life giving love.

Seconds passed, then minutes, and the two still clasped together, like a figure in one piece.

Slowly, languidly, she got up and out of bed, and sat down in the armchair. She covered her face with quivering hands, muttering 'My God! My God!' loud enough for him to hear.

He knew that the overseer in her had wakened, cocked a reproaching finger at her. She was overflowing with regret, flooding the room with its heavy, depressive presence.

He sat on an arm of her chair, his arms resting over her rounded shoulders, his hands over hers, caressing. 'Helen honey, it was so ordained,' he said with Hindu equanimity.

'We did it, the two of us,' she said, her voice trembling. 'We've moved too fast too quick.'

'Not in relation to the strength of our love. My love for you and, I hope, your love for me.'

'You don't need love. You seem so self-sufficient.'

'I need *your* love as much as I need air to live.'

'So there's some jelly here,' she said tapping his chest. Her voice had calmed. 'I always think of you as a hard-

headed cynic, childishy flippant one moment, darkly serious the next.'

'Flippant?'

'The Miss Right and Miss Wright story.'

'You remember that?'

'And a lot more than you think.'

He kissed her nape, then said, 'I'll miss you during holidays.'

'There's always the post office,' she said lightly. 'Don't you wish you were home for Christmas?'

'My home is London, with some friends,' he replied with as much cheer as he could muster.

'I might be in London myself.'

'When? Where?'

'I don't know, if I'll be lucky. You know I'm still the Beauty Queen of my county; and during Christmas season they invite two Queens to London, all expenses paid. A fashion house does that.'

'How do they select?'

'By lots.'

'Maybe I'll meet you at the Savoy, then,' he joked, but, inwardly, thinking of Helen going away was, to him, like touching his own aching tooth.

Tony had been going to evening classes for so long that he hardly noticed. Monica's addiction for them, however, was recent. Yes, she had taken a course in German before, Tony recalled, but her attitude towards it had been cavalier: she had gone when she felt like it, had neglected home work and had finally dropped out of the course complaining vaguely of the lackadaisical personality of the teacher. Her attitude toward the Spanish course, this term, was in sharp contrast. In spite of the strain that her mother's serious illness had put on her, and the help she had been called upon to give her father in running his restaurant, she had not missed a class, had spent hours doing home work, sometimes skipping her favourite programmes on television. At

first, the change in Monica had puzzled him, then bothered him; but, now, in the kitchen, watching Monica wash her stockings and gloves at the sink, he began to fret.

'We're going to France next year, for holidays, you know?' he said.

'Yes.'

'Why not to learn French then? Instead of Spanish?'

'Because I like the sound of Spanish, that's why. Haven't I told you before?'

'You're sure that's the only reason,' he said, and paused to reach for a toothpick. She said nothing, went on scrubbing her stockings. 'Neil Mahoney is in the same class, isn't he?'

'So are a dozen others.'

He went on picking his teeth, his feet on a kitchen chair; she kept on washing with her back to him.

'You can always transfer to another course—French or Italian.'

'It's too late.'

'Nothing is too late,' he said vehemently, and sat up abruptly. 'It's just a matter of a quid or two. You better change to another course.'

She did not like the tone of his voice. She turned around, and said with matching vehemence, 'You can't order me around. I'm not one of your docile Indian women.'

'Don't I know it?' he said half jeering, half angry. 'Don't I know it?' The revelation had come to him soon after their marriage. Before that Monica had been all sweetness and reason, never angry, ever complaisant, even siding with him against her parents. But then as she began drifting back to her parents she started fussing over trivialities simply to assert her independence. She would open the lounge window when he preferred it shut; she would deliberately leave the lights on just because he was thrifty by nature. Sometimes she would argue with him before others just for the sake of argument, to show that she dared. Unwilling to wage a war of attrition over trivialities he often gave in. But the more often he met her on her ground the more demanding she

became. She had already started going to films on her own. She would go off to her parents' without even telling him, or phoning him from their home. So it had gone on, much to his despair and frustration. But there was a limit to which a man could let this happen without having his very manhood challenged: that was where he was going to draw the line, and hold it: he was sure of that. 'I saw you with Neil again, in the canteen,' he said, disapproving.

'You think a woman should stop looking at other men the moment she's married,' she said defiantly. 'Well, I'm sorry, but this isn't an Indian village, you know.'

'You have no idea what an Indian village is like. So shut up.'

'You shut up!' she cried. 'And leave me alone!'

'I will, if you stop the Spanish class.'

'And if I don't?'

'I'll make you, force you. I'm a man, an Indian man,' he bawled out, getting up, stepping forward. He tried to grip her by the arm, but she jerked him off. In a flash she picked up the plastic water bowl and threw it at him. The soapy water filled his eyes; a stocking hung over his face. Furious, he struck out. He got her once; then she ducked and ran to the bathroom. He fumbled to the kitchen sink and washed his face.

He rushed to the bathroom and banged the door. He heard her crying. 'A man can't win,' he muttered; 'in this game a man can't win.'

He put his coat on, and went out.

In the fresh night air Tony took a cold look at his marriage, at Monica. Was he being unfair to her, ultra-suspicious? No, she had given him enough ground for suspicion, more than enough to shake him out of his relaxed frame of mind. It had to do with her pregnancy, or 'the pregnancy that was'. He recalled with a bilious taste the sleepless nights he had passed, then, speculating on the real reason behind her insistence on abortion.

Now, walking furiously, aimlessly, the wintry streets of

Kempton, he began speculating afresh. The same notion that had appeared months ago reappeared as a whisker of cloud, and then, growing into a baleful cloud, weighed heavily on his mind: the baby was illegitimate.

Who was the father? Who *could* be the father? He collected a few names in his head, started testing them, one by one, against the slot of Monica. No, they did not fit in—with two exceptions. One was Monica's boyfriend before he had met her. He had been posted in Cyprus but had returned home for a short leave. But that was some six months before Monica's pregnancy test. He was not the culprit, then. The other was Neil. He had seen him and Monica together in the college canteen more than once; he had noticed them exchange hurried, embarrassing glances the time Neil had visited them and they had visited Neil's family; and they had danced most of the evening at the Globe-Kem dance. Neil had a reputation for womanising and an old bag as his wife. So many signs pointed accusingly towards Neil that it would be foolish on his part to overlook them. He must do something. He must act to keep Monica away from the Spanish class even if it meant having a showdown. Only the serious illness of Monica's mother precluded a showdown. He would have to wait for a few weeks, then. Life was just too full of complications.

Chapter Ten

The pendulum of Dev's love that had once swung from Mac's guest house to Anselem's Hall was now at rest. He so much wished it to swing again and reach out to Priestfield Street, Easlington, where Helen was. He so much wished to participate in her life, to familiarise himself with it. Indeed he had made a beginning, of sorts: he had started reading D. H. Lawrence avidly, conscious that he must understand mining communities if he were to marry a miner's daughter. For, the words Helen and marriage were becoming synonymous in his mind.

And yet he felt obscurely menaced by a notion that his love for her would go unconsummated. He tried to shake the notion off but it returned larger and stronger. But that was nothing to fear. After all, life moved through contradiction. Pain and pleasure went together, love and suffering; the fire of suffering purifying the gold of love. Sparks of love between a man and a woman of different religions or clans; separation; the fires of love ablaze burning the hurdles down; and then reunion; that was the kernel of stories and poems in Urdu he had read and admired since boyhood. Now, probably, he would be the centre of one such story. Or was he being dramatic, getting carried away by his flights of imagination and panic? He was in England, not in India, or Iran, or Pakistan. Here the individual mattered, the girls made up their own minds, and parental control was minimal. Only the love between the boy and the girl counted. He must express his love for Helen. He

must send her a memorable Christmas present, the marble model of the Taj Mahal that he had brought from Bombay.

While he was thinking of Helen his mother was thinking of him:

‘You have not written in months,’ she began in her Urdu scrawl. ‘Why do you neglect us in this way? . . . Your father is all right now . . . but still without a job. He gets very moody often, losing interest in everything . . . The winter is in full swing. We don’t even have proper warm clothes . . .

‘My son, I have found a girl for you to marry. Her father was employed in the Governor’s office in the Punjab: his salary was Rs. 600. Now he has a business of his own near Delhi, making pipe connections. She’s the only daughter of her parents, one young brother only. This girl is very skilled in sewing and cooking, and knows how to run a house. She speaks good English and is a Matric pass. Her father would give a lot of dowry, at least Rs. 25,000 plus furniture, radio and clothes . . . The girl and father are already in London . . . attending an exhibition or something. They are originally from Multan: Sahnis, the same caste as us. Their address in London is . . . The girl is very fair skinned, like a mem-sahib. Her name is Chitra, a very modern name. Please go to London to meet them. If you marry her, all our problems will be over . . .’

Dev’s mind was brought down from the clouds of love and poetry to the hard ground of reality: money and tradition. He saw the chasm that divided him from his parents, and felt depressed. But not for long. After all, he had never been a subservient child and with time and distance the umbilical cord had weakened. He had little wish to shape his life in the shadow of his parents, but how could he ignore their destitution? Twenty-five thousand rupees was a large sum, almost £2,000. Ten thousand rupees could get his father started in a business; the other ten thousand could ‘buy’ his nubile sister a husband, a clerk with a B.A. and a secure government job. But, first, he would have to

'sell' himself. He found the idea totally unacceptable. No, he would not barter his convictions for a bundle of bank-notes. And yet he did not wish to hurt his parents' feelings. Perhaps there was a middle ground that he could tread.

And days later, after much thinking and soul searching, he found it.

Seeing the girl in London did not in any way commit him to marriage. He could 'see' her, then reject her for the kind of reasons his parents would understand. Moreover it would be useful to know Shyam Lal's brother who worked at the Indian High Commission. As a prospective groom he would be treated with deference: he would love to have home cooked Indian dishes.

He put the Taj Mahal away, and sent Helen a humorous Christmas card instead.

The Christmas card for Arjun, he delivered in person. Arjun thought it a strictly Christian custom but found a place for it near his new radio set on the mantelpiece.

'My only form of entertainment,' Arjun said, switching on the radio. 'I even get All India Radio on it.'

'Still tuned to home,' Dev said; but Arjun did not hear him, engrossed, as he already was, in folding old issues of *The Times*.

'*The Times* is a serious newspaper,' Arjun said, shoving the stack of papers under his narrow bed. 'Most others are vulgar and full of trash—sex, violence and gossip. This is the civilization of the hip and the bust, and the gun.'

'I'm afraid you're taking the headlines of Sunday scandal-sheets much too seriously. Look at the serious papers: they drip with culture, reviews of books, plays, pictures, paintings.'

'Of course, not as many books are published in India.'

'India, India, India. Do you pass a day without chanting India, India a hundred times?'

'What's wrong with that?' Arjun asked, hurt.

'Everything; at least something. Because that's what holds you back from understanding this country, what makes it

tick, what made it tick?' Dev took a long pull at his cigarette. 'You're like a thousand others, wrapped up in a small circle of your compatriots,' he said, more in sorrow than in anger, for Arjun was, after all, a close friend of his.

'I don't want to be an Englishman. Perhaps, you want to be.'

'Damn the Englishman, damn the Indianman,' Dev cried. 'My point is simple. You're in another country, another culture. Why not try and understand it? And staying away from the curry-crowd will help.'

Arjun rose slowly, ponderously from the edge of his bed. He began washing onions, then peeling them. 'Fine sentiments well expressed,' he said, his eyes watering from cutting onions. 'But they don't treat you right in this country. You know what happened to me last year.' Dev nodded, subdued. 'But the story continues: this year, for my thesis, I wanted data-collecting facilities with an English company, but they turned me down. Even a strong word from my professor didn't help. Of course, they were quite hypocritical about it. Trade secrets, they said.'

'What makes you doubt that?'

'Because,' Arjun cried, throwing his knife-holding hand in the air, 'a Portuguese student from my class was let in. The same firm. Of course, they allowed a few weeks between my rejection and his acceptance, clever bastards as they are. He was all right: he was *their* colour.' He put the knife and onions away, and sat down. 'What's the use of being the best brain in this country if your colour isn't right?' he said softly, as if talking to himself. 'And only white is right.'

Only white is right, Dev repeated to himself. Now he understood what had turned the generally phlegmatic Arjun into an active hater of England, and the western world. He wasn't sure if his own bitterness had dissolved, but it certainly had settled down: Helen seemed to have had a calming effect on him. He wondered if she had won the lottery for the Beauty Queen's visit to London.

Arjun resumed cooking. 'I could have gone to Russia on a scholarship if I had tried a little,' he said. 'At least they treat us as equals.'

'How do you know?'

'From the chaps who have been there. But learning their language is a problem.'

'How did you manage in Sweden?'

'Most of them understand English. It's a costly country to live in, but clean. And lots of pretty girls!'

'Prettier than Mabel?' Dev asked, grinning. 'I got a Christmas card from her.'

'She's in Devon for Christmas.'

'You seem to know her itinerary. Is it steady?'

'No, not with me,' he said in a dismissing tone. 'I've never been too keen on girls here.'

'Nor am I,' Dev said, hurriedly, 'at the present time, that is. Because I've found *the* girl.'

'What's her name?'

'Helen. It's the Greek word for light,' he said sentimentally.

'Helen of Troy,' Arjun said. 'I once saw a film by that name, in Bombay. What are you, Paris or——'

'Menelaus,' Dev said. Arjun had asked the question, offhandedly, but Dev felt ripples of doubt about Helen spreading from the centre of his mind. Perhaps Helen had a steady boyfriend in Easington. The circles of doubt widened, bobbed up and down. He had a sinking feeling.

'You better tell this friend of mine how to get a girl. He thinks of nothing else. He should be here soon.'

They had just finished washing dishes when there was a knock on the door; and a stocky young man with wide cuffed trousers entered, grinning widely.

'Tiwari, the cartoonist!' Dev cried, striding forward.

'Hello, hello, hello!' Tiwari said, embracing Dev with his short arms. 'No future for a cartoonist. So I went for a management diploma.'

Shyam Lal was a plump man of fifty with sprouting cheeks around his thin little mouth which broke into an expansive smile when he greeted Dev. He led him to the living room where his brother, Ram Lal, looking like his twin, gave Dev a limpid handshake.

Shyam Lal sat, sinking his chin in his chest, coughed to clear his throat, looked at Dev with interest, and said, 'You look so much like your father. He and I went to the same college in Lahore.'

'How nice,' Dev mumbled.

'He was never too keen about his studies. Liked to play tennis more than anything else, and then he was soon married off.'

'He hasn't been keeping good health recently'

'Yes, the worries. It was hard on him, the whole Pakistan business. It was hard on all of us. But he was used to an easy life while your grandfather's practice brought in all the money. Quite a shock to hear of his demise.'

'A grand old man,' Dev muttered.

'All of us have to go one day or the other. It's all in our fate--written here,' Shyam Lal said, pointing to the palm of his hand. 'What does a man leave behind except his good deeds? That way he also improves his standing in the next life,' he calculated, sighing. Dev and Ram Lal sighed in sympathy. Shyam Lal plucked the brown bulb of his nose. 'Have you seen the exhibition of industrial piping at Wembley?' he asked Dev, rolling the nasal mucus between his fingers.

'No,' Dev replied.

'You should, if only for the sake of your career I met a very brilliant fellow there. Tiwari is his name, a brilliant engineer and manager. I've offered him a job with my firm.'

'Yes,' Dev nodded with a flicker of a smile—after all Tiwari, the Resourceful, had found his vocation.

A mysterious signal from behind the door drew Ram Lal away. He exchanged a few incoherent words and returned, announcing, 'Dinner is ready.'

Dev sat at the head of the table with Ram Lal and his self-effacing wife on the left, and Shyam Lal and Chitra on the right. Chitra was a small slim girl with small sharp features whose glances kept drifting, shyly, towards Dev. Dev found her swarthy reposefulness in sharp contrast to Helen's pink and white vivacity.

Determined to maintain the demeanor of a shy, hesitant son-in-law-in-the-making, Dev fixed his sights on his dishes, eating slowly and moderately, speaking only when spoken to. He had been 'acting' for so long that when the meal was over and he found himself alone with Chitra at the dining-table, he *really* did not know what to say or do. It was a few minutes before he could even bring himself to glance at her, taking care to look at her when she was looking at something else. But their eyes met. He turned crimson; she blushed, her cheeks and ears turning red.

Minutes passed. Their mutual embarrassment was changing to impatience. Chitra threw Dev a beseeching look, slower than an embrace, more urgent than a call. Goaded by her glance he prepared to talk—but in an unguarded moment he gulped: the words were lost. What was the matter with him, he wondered. Ten minutes had passed without a word. In that time he would have spoken two thousand words with Helen; with Chitra, the score was zero. Why?

He saw her tidying up her green sari: she was leaving, he thought. 'A bit cold in England,' he said at last.

'Just like Delhi in winter,' she said slowly, the words garbled by the recent grease in her throat.

'Hm . . . do you like London?'

'Yes. It's much larger than Delhi. Yesterday, Daddy and I went to the India Tea Centre.'

'To some Indian restaurants too, I suppose.'

'But they cost so much money. One meal is eight shillings or more. That's more than five rupees,' she said, doing her arithmetic on her finger tips under the table. 'In India one can feed a family on that.'

He relaxed: the situation was not as hopeless as he had feared. 'That's quite true,' he agreed. He took out a packet of cigarettes: out of a reflex, his arm stretched forward.

'We Indian women don't smoke,' she said, her cheeks flushing red. 'Perhaps you've forgotten. Not like women here, they're so loose and free.'

'You mean Indian women don't smoke in public.'

'What does that mean?'

'Like my mother. She smokes *bidis* (brown cigarettes) in the lavatory.'

'How can you——' Partly her sense of outrage at his bluntness and partly the sudden appearance of her father choked off her words.

'Er . . . I forgot my pipe . . . there,' Shyam Lal muttered, walking towards the mantelpiece. 'Believe me, nothing like a hooka,' he said to Dev. 'Not even the best cigar of Europe can taste as good.'

A sign from her aunt at the door drew Chitra away.

Shyam Lal sat down in the chair next to Dev's, lit his pipe, took a few puffs and belched noisily. 'I suppose you want to know her more. I know the modern youths. I never saw my wife even once before we were married, not even a glance. And we were happily married till God took her away from us—two years, last month.' Emotion choked his throat; he puffed at his pipe. 'And so did your father marry,' he resumed. 'No fancy dinners and meetings and cinemas in those days. But this is *Naya Zamana*, they say, the new times. All those English films are corrupting our youths, giving them the wrong ideas . . . But who would listen to an old man like me? Youth is stone dead nowadays, no longer the respect the young used to show for the old in my days . . .'

At several points in Shyam Lal's speech Dev felt an urge to give him a real taste of the *Naya Zamana*, but remembering his grandfather's advice to learn to curb his impulses, the plight of his family and the enormous size of Shyam Lal's bank balance, he kept quiet. Moreover, the girl

was entitled to a fuller chance to show her personality; and it was only common decency that the seriousness of the occasion be maintained.

'If you want to take her out to a cinema, it's all right with me. But you must take good care of her: she's my only daughter. Indian men respect women,' Shyam Lal said with the gravity of an undertaker, to which Dev nodded solemnly. Shyam Lal put on a thinker's mask and withdrew for a while. 'How about tomorrow afternoon?' he asked.

'All right,' Dev said, rather reluctantly. He would much rather have kept his afternoon and evening free in case Helen arrived from Easlington and contacted him at his hotel.

'You should go to a matinee show. Come and fetch her here. I can't let my daughter go out without a chaperon.'

Dev nodded politely.

He had begun all this out of a sense of duty but, to his own surprise, a part of him was rather enjoying it. The sensation of walking with a girl in a sari in London was new to him. And that afternoon he felt as if the girl in a sari and he were carrying a world of their own, right in the middle of London, in the West End, where they went to see, of all films *Bhowani Junction*. And their world, or more precisely the world of Chitra, was different from the world around them, Dev realized again, when lured by the darkness of the cinema hall his hand, stealthily, reached out for hers and was jerked off by her as if it were a live wire. As his hand was thrown off, something clicked in his mind: Ava Gardner, on screen, was Helen in fifteen years' time—beautiful, mature, immensely vital—or the other way around. His mind was already away, out of the cinema hall, beyond the Bhowani Junction, contemplating Helen, speculating on her lottery. But it was Chitra who was with him, he realized, when the film finished.

What had to be endured might as well be endured with a certain cheer, he decided philosophically, regarding the small figure of Chitra in the twilight of central London. So

he smiled at her profusely, looking attentive, but keeping his hands, firmly, in his pockets.

Perhaps Chitra too had similar thoughts, for in the underground train, suddenly, she moved closer to him and said, 'That actor looked like Raj Kapoor. In Delhi I have lots and lots of records, film songs. I like Radio Ceylon with all the film songs in it, not the boring classical music they put out on All India Radio.'

'Which paper do you prefer?'

'I never miss the *Filmfare*. In the last issue they published an interview with Dilip Kumar. He is so beautiful. I like I. S. Johar's page: it's so funny all the time. He is getting roles in Hollywood pictures,' she said, wide eyed. 'But he is so ugly, skinny.'

'Yes, skinny. Sarjit Ray makes superb films.'

'Oh, he gives our country such a bad name,' she said, her nose in wrinkles. 'All the poverty he shows. What will others think of us? His cinemas are so boring, with no songs or dances.'

'Yes. No, I mean, no songs and dances,' he said, fishing for a cigarette.

'If you smoke too much you'll burn your lungs out. Daddy used to smoke too much, that also strong "Char Minar" cigarettes so I gave him a pipe as a Divali present. (How did she know that "Char Minar" was a strong cigarette, Dev wondered.) I shall buy a lot of perfumes and make-ups here. They don't have good perfumes in India. All imports stopped, that is why. Daddy will buy lots of razor blades. The Indian blades scrape his skin. He has so small an exchange he has got. Do you know he even got less than one-tenth exchange of rupees he wanted?'

'Really?' he said, looking straight into her face: he thought her lips seductive, very much fuller than Helen's: why hadn't he noticed them before?

'They are so strict about foreign exchange. Otherwise I wanted to buy a tape-recorder, a nice one.'

'A nice one,' he repeated, leaning toward her lips.

‘Shepherds Bush,’ she announced, looking out.

Aware that each yard nearer her home signalled a further fall in his chances to kiss her, he felt more and more eager to do so. But wouldn’t that spoil the image of restraint that he had so painstakingly built up? What use was that to him, anyway? He wasn’t going to marry her. That was definite. As they turned a corner his hand clutched the back of her nimble neck, her frightened face went up in a look of helplessness and his lips fell on hers with such a passion that when she had wriggled herself out of his grip a few minutes later, she was stunned. Then a surge of anger overwhelmed her: she swung her purse at him. He ducked. The purse hit his hat and opened, the contents falling like rain-drops, as the hat cruised in mid-air and fell on the road.

‘Ooooooooounnn!’ she whimpered. ‘What will I do now? My make-up a mess, my purse in the street.’

Dev ran to get his hat: a car screeched to a halt. ‘D’you ever look?’ the driver bawled. Chitra stood gazing horrified.

‘You see what happens when you don’t control your temper,’ Dev said in a parental voice, brushing off his hat.

‘It’s all your fault. Your sudden moves. I’m not a cheap English girl. I wanted my husband to be the first to kiss me. You’re not a gentleman.’

‘I’d much rather be a man than a *gentleman*.’

‘Suppose I tell my father about this.’

‘In that case I leave now,’ he threatened, turning sideways. ‘He’ll think you came back from the cinema alone.’

‘All right, you win,’ she said, exasperated. She stood under a street light and began combing her hair and applying lipstick.

It was hard for Dev to feel relaxed at her home. Uneasy at the prospect of Chitra not keeping her word, and anxious to return to his hotel to see if there was any word from Helen, he prepared to leave as soon as he politely could. ‘You write to your parents whatever you decide,’ Shyam Lal told him in a conspirator’s whisper at the door. ‘We fly back next Friday. Good luck, *son!*’

Chitra couldn't sleep that night. She wanted to tell someone what had happened but couldn't risk telling her aunt fearful that it would eventually reach her father. She got up, took out her diary, looked at its fly-leaf marked 'Please DESTROY this before reading it', and began writing: '... My earlier hunch that Mr ——— was not really quiet and mild mannered has come true. The way he behaved with me in a street suddenly . . . it showed him in his true light. That's why I like him all the more: I *love* him. After all, a man should be brave, full of force and cunning but a woman is different, she should be subtle and elusive. But I must admit I wasn't that at all this afternoon. In one foolish moment I let all my good work (showing him that I was frugal by disapproving high prices in restaurants, that I cared for his health and did not like his excessive smoking) go to a waste. I hit him! I hit him hard. . '

She read what she had written. The longer she looked at the words 'I hit him', the larger they grew. She felt an impulse to do something to repair the damage she had done to her marriage prospects. She began a letter to Dev.

'Dear Mr Verma:

This is indeed a bold step for an unmarried Indian girl like me. I have been worried about what happened near our house today. I feel sorry for my behaviour. I realize now that I was more shocked than angry. Now that the shock is over, I see that you must have felt strongly for me to take such a bold step in an open street. I consider that more a complement than an affront. I sincerely do.

Please *destroy* this letter. We may not see each other again ever, but I shall always remember you as the first man who kissed me. It was quite an experience for me. God be with you.

Yours sincerely,
Chitra Sahni.'

She put the letter in an envelope but realized that she did not have his address. If she asked her father and if he

knew about her letter he would once again start his sermon on the '*Naya Zamana*': she had better ask Dev's sister on their return to Delhi.

'LEGALIZE ABORTIONS!' was certainly a bizzare placard even for a place like Speakers' Corner, Dev thought. Curiosity carried him to the fringe of the crowd listening to the speaker from that platform.

'Thomas Malthus in his "Essay On The Principles Of Population As It Affects The Future Improvement Of Society" talks of the positive and the preventive checks that today have become——'

'Malthus with bad teeth!' someone from the crowd interjected.

A burst of laughter.

'Impotent!'

'Pessimist!'

'Do you have a question?' the young speaker asked.

'Atheist!'

'Do you have a question?' the speaker cried, scratching his bulbous nose.

'Dirty Capitalist!'

'Malthus to the gallows!'

'Commie!'

A small band of hecklers began singing:

'He's a Malthus with bad teeth,
Crying out for a rubber sheath!'

Dev felt a pang of sympathy for the speaker. It was unfair that a few hecklers should silence a serious speaker. He went behind the platform and tugged at the speaker's coat. The speaker threw him a look of annoyance. 'I want to help you,' Dev cried. 'Don't you have a relief?'

'He's ill.'

'Let me relieve you then. You look tired.'

'Thank you, mate. Won't be long.'

'Give me those pamphlets,' Dev said, stepping on the platform.

'The pages are earmarked.'

'There, friends!' Dev began, opening a pamphlet at random. 'In ancient and medieval times the population increased 0.1 per cent a year, in the 18th century three times as high, in the 19th, six times. And in 1959, eighteen times. Eighteen times! Take Asia alone. The population rose 19 per cent in the first quarter of the century but——'

'Speak of Europe,' someone shouted.

'Speak of Europe!' Dev taunted. 'You're a bloody minority, on worldwide basis.' The Afro-Asian part of the crowd laughed. 'Now Mr Minority, the figures for you are nineteen, fourteen and thirty-one. These are the figures,' he said holding up the pamphlet. 'In 1975, the population of Asia alone will be as much as the whole world put together in 1950, about 2.2497 billion——'

'Speak slowly,' a voice interrupted.

'What are you, English or Gallic?' Dev asked, and paused, arms folded across his chest. The crowd laughed uproariously.

'Why stop nature?' a woman with an umbrella asked.

'Otherwise nature will stop you.'

Another burst of laughter.

Buoyed by the audience response Dev went on, 'It's insane of us to bring forth babies doomed to live sub-human lives, insane of us to condemn the generations unborn to the misery of disease, poverty and ignorance. Insane, insane, INSANE! So in the name of Humanity, in the name of Commonsense, I appeal to the governments of the world, legalize——'

'Abortions!' the crowd shouted unexpectedly.

'Legalize!' Dev cried, electrified.

'Abortions!'

'What's all the shouting about?' Catherine Bradbury asked Helen who, binoculars in hand, stood at a window of the Hotel Alpha facing Speakers' Corner.

'Just a crowd of people,' Helen replied.

'Never heard our people shout so loud since the depression.' Catherine came to the window, looked out. 'Oh, look at all the coloureds! Never knew there was so many coloureds in our country.'

'London is a big city, mother, millions of people.'

'What are they shouting about? They've got the jobs.'

'I wish I knew. There, I can read some of the posters. Le-ga-lize A-bor-tions. Legalize Abortions.'

'What? Legalize abortions? Posters saying "Legalize Abortions"? Why, this country is going to the dogs. The next thing they'd be shouting "legalize murder"! Cannibals!' Catherine said, and returned to her half-opened bags. 'What were our missionaries doing in Africa? Didn't they teach them the Lord's message?'

'Now, mother,' Helen said; but there was no appeal in her voice. She was too engrossed in deciding whether the man addressing the crowd was Dev. She looked hard: it was him all right. She felt a powerful itch to call her mother and say to her, 'Look, mother, that's the young man I've been going out with in Cheverly. Isn't he clever?' But she heard the click of a door being bolted: her mother had gone to the lavatory. And a good job, too. For after her initial excitement had died down Helen felt furiously angry with Dev for speaking from the platform of 'Legalize Abortions!' She would certainly not phone him at the number he had given her. She couldn't see him, anyway. Her programme had been tightly arranged.

A tea-trolley arrived. Catherine and Helen sat around it ceremoniously. 'Look at the tea set! Real class! So thoughtful of them to leave a pair of binoculars for your theatre, this evening,' Catherine said. 'I wish your father was here.'

'Now, mother, the sponsors are inviting the girl, not her whole family. With all the trouble I had getting you in as a chaperon...'

Shyam Lal and Chitra thought the signs of 'The

Protestant Truth Society', 'The Hebrew League of Great Britain' and 'The Society for Evangelizing London' very exotic. But the words of Christianity and Judaism sounded meaningless to them. They moved to a familiar sign of 'The Movement for Freedom in Kashmir'. Familiar but distasteful. They drifted to the bizarre platform of 'Poblacht Oibrithe in Eirean Gcuspóir ('The Cause of Labour is the Cause of Ireland') and then to 'The Movement of Pan-African Exponents and Peoples of African Descent'. They listened to the Negro speaker with incredulity and fascination: how could the British authorities let a Negro get away with such abuse of the whites?

And then Chitra thought she saw a vision. She rubbed her eyes, and looked again: Dev Raj Verma on a speaker's platform! She manoeuvred her father toward the crowd surrounding him.

Shyam Lal listened for a while, then said, 'Chitra, don't you think the speaker looks like Dev Raj Verma? The same voice too.'

'No, Daddy,' Chitra replied 'I don't think so.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, sure. What has a respectable engineer like Mr Verma got to do with a subject like abortions? He might be someone else. There are thousands of Indians and Pakistanis in London, daddy. I'm feeling a bit hungry.'

They had just reached the restaurant across the road when the cries of 'Legalize Abortions!' broke out. Shyam Lal stopped momentarily to look back, but Chitra prodded him through the revolving door into the restaurant.

On her arrival at home, Chitra added a postscript to her letter to Dev:

'Listened to your speech at Hyde Park corner. I love the way you speak—such beautiful English, and so fast too, faster than any Englishman. All those numbers and theories you were explaining, they were a bit difficult for my little brain. Now remember, if ever my father asks you if you speak

at Hyde Park, please say "No". Say "No" for *my* sake. Please. He never likes young men who shout slogans in streets and such like—C.S.'

One of Dev's New Year's resolutions was to join the Chess Group at the company's sports club. The Chess Group, however, had ceased recruiting while they busily arranged the first inter-company tournament in Cheverly with players coming in from London and Kempton. One of the players, Dev noticed happily, was Bruce Stewart.

On the day of the tournament the small hall of the sports club was full of players who sat quietly, ghostlike, pondering over their chess boards.

Dev saw Bruce playing in the centre of the hall with his balding head leaning over the board, absorbed. Now and then, Bruce would lift his head and throw a few glances but never far enough to catch Dev who sat in a corner periodically lifting his hand in the air hoping to draw Bruce's attention without disturbing his train of thought. At last the game finished; and from Bruce's expression Dev inferred that he had won. Dev went forward and pumped Bruce's hand who held it tight as he said, 'I was hoping you'd be here. Why didn't you come to my New Year's Eve party?'

'The snow kept me back,' Dev explained. 'I don't have the best tyres on my car.'

They went together to get ginger ale, found an empty table and sat down.

'It was a real rowdy party,' Bruce said with a certain bravado. 'You'd think a bunch of teddy boys and girls had got together. Will got up on a chair, a Drambuie bottle in hand, and started singing, "The Green Hills of Highland".'

'Was he there? At your place?' Dev could not hide his disapproval.

'A Scotsman holds no grudge against anyone on New Year's Eve. Ask him,' Bruce said, pointing towards Raymond Reynolds, the secretary of the sports club. In his early

thirties, Ray was a small muscular man with a workman's rough hands. A premature hunch and a pointed nose gave his profile the look of an Olympian torch bearer.

'Yes,' Ray said, sitting down at their table.

'What's this I hear about you not being able to come to the club before one o'clock?' Bruce asked. 'Today is Saturday.'

'It's the pile of orders the company has on its hands,' Ray replied.

'Well, it's time and half on Saturdays.'

'You must be joking. It's slave labour. We're living in the eighteenth century here. It's a family concern which sold out to the big Globe-Kem. That's all. Nothing else is changed.'

'But you can always join the Union. Just write to the General Secretary...' Bruce said, and began flipping through his Union diary for the address.

'Don't bother. It can't be done.'

'It's a free country.'

'Free to play tricks, if you ask me. This is what happens here. When the management confirms you in your job—it may take as long as ten years—they make you sign an agreement covering your pension scheme. One of the clauses there says that the party concerned agrees not to join a union. So there you are, trapped,' Ray said, crossing his wrists.

'The capitalist sharks! How are your wages?'

'A shade below the Union rates.'

'I see the company ad for draughtsmen in the local paper every day,' Dev said.

'They haven't found even one draughtsman yet,' Ray said. 'They're tapping Kempton again.'

'No luck there too,' Bruce said, sliding up his glasses. 'Family men don't like moving; and there aren't many bachelors left.'

'I heard some Dutchman from Kempton is willing.'

'We were just talking of him, Will DeBruin,' Bruce said.

'He's divorced. He'd go anywhere there's an extra allowance. He's noisy as hell: he got into an argument with the Union Secretary at my party, saying, unions should be banned, they force the prices up.'

'Just the sort our management would like to have,' Ray said. 'Well, I must circulate.' He got up and left.

'Where was I?' Bruce said. 'Yes, we expected your friend Tony to come to the party, but they didn't come: his mother-in-law died on Christmas Eve. Did you know Neil is clean shaven? The rumour is that his mistress sheared off his moustache while he was asleep.'

For a few laughing, shaking moments Dev was without a thought of Helen.

Chapter Eleven

'...the result is that I have renounced the world'—Dev recognized the handwriting of his father. Everything else about the acrogram was strange: it was written on the outside, and in Urdu; it bore the address of Divine Life Society, Sivanagar (Himalayas); and was unsigned:

'I have reached this place at the foot of mountains,' the note went on. 'It is now my desire to go into the interior of the Himalayas in the company of some sage. My last wish is that you will prove yourself to be the obedient and dutiful son who brings comfort and prosperity to his family and elders. Our religion and culture enjoin upon the young to bring solace to their elders. God be with you. OM!'

Renunciation, a coward's tool, a flight from life. Dev saw little dignity in it, and no logic. While his father was casting off his own responsibility to his family he was urging Dev to meet his 'dutifully'. A running man was asking him to stand and fight. The words 'obedience' and 'duty' sounded hollow when they came from his father. Furious and distressed, he cursed his father bitterly.

But was it really his father's fault? Was he not himself a victim of circumstances? He had been married off early by his parents and placed in a clerical job. He had fathered six children in ten years. But still life had been easy for him. Mool Chand's legal practice had thrived; and there were rents from land and buildings. Then the partition of British India changed all that. As victims of religious rioting and killing that broke out then, they had to run for their lives.

Overnight they became paupers living on dole in a refugee camp near Delhi. After the initial shock that lasted a few months he had tried to come to grips with the new reality. But, somehow, it had not worked out. For him the ten years since partition had been filled with long stretches of unemployment and the failure of a business started on a modest government loan. His health had been deteriorating. There was never enough money to meet the expenses of his school-going children and his doctor's bills. The constant lack of money had begun to corrode his soul, make him irritable and gloomy. Now unable to grapple with his problems he had opted for the tranquil heights of the Himalayas. Who was to blame him for that?

Dev wondered if he should fly home to bring succour to his family, but the question was academic: he could not afford the fare. It was best to wait for details. These came, by air-mail, from his mother. His father had got up very early one morning and left with a few clothes and little money; and the next they had received a post card from him asking them not to try and trace him. She listed the worries she had, then wrote, 'Only you can help us now. If you marry Chitra Sahni, all our problems will be over. Her father might take you in his business. However, in the shadow of your father's bad news we can't plan an early marriage, only a betrothal . . . Your cousin-brother has come to stay with us. He is a grown-up man . . .'

Problems, problems, problems: they were choking his channels of thought; hindering his forward, liberating movement; prodding him back to the folds of his family. Once again he was being plagued with the signals of duty and help. What was he to do? Stand pat, uncompromising, self-assertive, or submit to pressure? Well, there was no tearing hurry to answer the question. He should first let the turmoil in his mind subside. He must think. Think calmly. Consult someone. Who? Bruce? No, he had no idea what Hindu family life was like. Tony? Perhaps; but he was himself in doldrums, his marriage on the rocks. Arjun? Yes.

But he could predict what Arjun would say: do as your mother wants. Retreat, in other words, retreat.

He wished Helen were near. He would, unhesitatingly, unload his mind before her.

But Helen had other matters on her mind. 'What were you doing at Hyde Park corner?' she asked him the moment they met outside the central library.

'So you won the lottery?' he said, surprised and pleased. 'Why didn't you phone me at my hotel?'

'My mother was with me.'

'I'd have liked to meet her.'

'And give her a lecture on legalizing abortions, I suppose,' she said with a piercing voice.

'Oh, that was all in good humour,' he said, avoiding her stare. 'I'll be glad to tell you how all that happened—at Mac's guest house.'

'I'd rather go to a film,' she said coldly.

She delighted, uproariously, in the subtle humour of Jacques Tati's French film but that did not thaw the iceberg in her.

There was a long, heavy silence between them in his car. Finally, he said, 'How about a Sunday afternoon spin?'

She went on wiping the car window on her side as she said, 'I have an essay to submit on Monday.'

'We meet next Saturday then.'

'Why don't you phone me during the week?'

The signs looked ominous, Dev thought, fretting. Helen was adding one more element of turbulence to his muddled mind instead of tranquillizing it. Or was he panicking nervously again? He would phone, soon, and find out.

But there was no need, for he had a letter from her that following Monday. 'I have thought carefully and feel that our relationship cannot continue,' it began. His legs were shaking; he sat down. 'I feel, as I once said, that our relationship developed much too quickly. Believe me, I would much rather have told you this in person, and did try . . . God bless you!'

He could see nothing but dark patches before his eyes. He got up and slipped under the bed sheets. His head ached and he wondered if he should take Alka-Seltzer, but he couldn't move. With the onset of a flood he realized that Helen had left him, that his first real love had failed. He felt an awful pang and a wave of longing rose in him, coming out as tears from his eyes. He started to shiver and an oppressive feeling of nausea spread through him like a pinch of dye in hot water, filling every cell of his body—and grasping a bed sheet he began mumbling, 'I must have a bath; I must divert myself . . .'

The next morning he felt rested but strange. His eyes were fixed on the drawing board, his fingers manoeuvred the pencils and drawing instruments, but his thoughts were focussed on the monstrous predicament facing him: the dilemma of direction. There were two directions to choose from: East and West. He could steer the ship of his life to its source: back home, secure in his heritage and culture, obeisant to his elders. Or he could continue westward—go for Helen all the way, marry her, cast his lot with her society.

Which way was he to steer: East or West?

He could decide only after he knew the *real* reason behind Helen's letter. He thought of phoning her, but realized that a phone was a blunt instrument for such operations. If he wrote her she might not reply soon, and even if she did, how could he be sure that she had told him the truth? Had she found another young man? It couldn't be someone in Cheverly: she had spent all her spare time with him. If she had a boyfriend at Easington, it hadn't prevented her from dating him earlier; why should it now? There was only one way to find out: to confront her in person.

He saw her at the Union Hall, in a corner, surrounded by a cluster of girls. The music began. He cut through the knot of girls and stood before her, solicitous. She hesitated for a moment but he led her off to the floor, his stare fixed on her, cold and unnerving. She shied away from him,

apologetic, feeling the depth of hurt she had caused him. There was no need for words. He readily, almost eagerly, forgave her. He loved her: how could he be harsh with her? She was looking her best, rather regal; and waltzing with her he knew she was the girl he couldn't afford to lose. He *had* to have her.

In the common room upstairs he told her, rather sombrely, 'There's something personal and important I'd like to discuss with you.'

She looked at him slowly, penetratingly, saying as if: I like you that way; you look human, fallible. Then she nodded. They fixed a date.

They exchanged few words in his car but he had a buoyant feeling that their minds had once again moved into the same orbit. 'Why did you write me that letter?' he asked her.

She said nothing, kissed him hard and stepped out hurriedly.

She kissed him, not he her. He knew she loved him, always had. Now she was coming back to him, lighting up his murky sky. In the flood of exultation his channels of thinking were washed clean: he could think clearly: her letter was only a ruse to draw an overt response from him, the female version of arm twisting. And it had worked. It had forced him to choose: Helen or Chitra.

He did not want Chitra. He was heading West, choosing Helen. He told his mother so, politely, diffusively. Chitra was a nice girl but her 'interests' were different from his; besides, he was not *yet* ready to return home. He would, however, send as much money as he could. He did not tell her about Helen: it might hurt her feelings, she had suffered enough recently.

He knew he was letting down his family. But what was the use of winning the world while losing one's soul? To be at peace with himself he had to be true to himself, first and foremost. Indeed he was being true to the core of Hindu philosophy which says, simply, 'Know thyself.'

While his father had opted out of the worldly life itself,

he was only opting out of his tradition. Yet both were alike: they had displaced themselves consciously. As the father, so the son.

Dev found it ironic to receive a letter from Chitra the same day Helen was visiting him. He read it, amused, and threw it away.

In his room Helen sat with legs folded beneath her in the old arm-chair. 'Here I am, all ears,' she said, touching her red lantern ear-rings.

'Oh yes, something important and personal,' he said scratching his head clownishly. 'What is it?' He moved toward the light switch.

'Uuunnn . . . unnn,' she croaked, getting up.

'No monkey business. It's simply that darkness washes inhibition white.'

She was obviously not amused: 'How long do you think this will last?'

'Could be a long time,' he said, enigmatically, looking away. 'If we get married, that is.'

'That's something,' she said, smothering him with kisses. 'A proposal from you!' Another shower of kisses. 'How do they propose in India?'

'They don't propose,' he began and went on to tell her about his visit to Shyam Lal's place. Then he rummaged through the waste-paper basket and found Chitra's letter. 'Read this.'

'I shall remember you as the first man who kissed me,' Helen read aloud, and broke into a chuckle. 'It sounds so Victorian.'

'Just about.'

'Tell me more about your life back home.'

'It's a long story.'

'To expect brevity from you is like expecting a baby from a nun.'

That was where he began when he was a baby, the first baby of his parents named *dev*, a god, who became,

after his sacred thread ceremony, *dev raj*, a god's kingdom, who liked trapping *bulbuls*, singing nightingales; flying kites on the town *maidan*; playing *kabadi*, *kabadi*; and who, as a follower of Gandhi wore handwoven *khadi*, spun cotton on a wheel, and once, excitedly, made a bonfire of British topees.

She listened, hypnotized, hanging on to his words that were magically changing the strange into the fascinating, and the obscure into the enchanting. She got up to stretch her legs, drifted to the edge of the bed where he sat amidst pictures, letters and testimonials, the landmarks of his life. He looked up and saw her naked with love. Her lips fell on his: mouth to mouth, groin to groin. They felt everything going round and round—the golden sun, the placid brown canals, the green ears of wheat undulating, the clay lamps of Diwali flickering on the parapets of terraces.

'Next time, it's your turn,' he said, prostrate on his pillow

'I'll be brief,' she said, buttoning up her blouse. 'And practical.'

He lay in bed for a long time, leisurely winding and unwinding a fallen hair of hers, silken to touch, round his index finger. The moon's rays came through the window, calm on the flowers. He got up slowly, pleasurably, and looked out: the sky stretched flat and dusky blue. There wasn't a cloud in sight.

Helen came to his room, a week later, in a tight collared black dress with long sleeves to emphasise, indirectly—at least—that she was a good, sexless Catholic who would marry a non-Catholic only under the set of conditions 'specified by the Holy Church'.

Dev's colour faded: he said nothing.

There were the directives of the Holy Church on family planning and on the rearing of children in the Catholic faith, which she explained meticulously.

He listened, tight lipped, thinking that Will DeBruin's

fear of a Papal conspiracy to swamp the world with Catholics wasn't ludicrous, after all.

'That's how it is,' she concluded.

Suddenly, within minutes, a wide chasm between the Catholic Helen and Dev had been discovered. He found her unwilling to move. He had to do all the bridging. He had rebelled against the rigidity of the Hindu social behaviour. Now he was being offered a set of rules even more rigid. He felt forsaken, lost to both sides, an orphan who had as if set his own trap and caught himself by the throat. He felt unbearably bitter. 'How can the Pope who's just a human being like you and me be infallible?' he asked acidly.

She began a long weary explanation. He lost interest half way through and threw a disparaging curse at the Pope. 'I'll hear no filthy words about the Pope or the Church,' she cried, her cheeks flushing red. 'Your trouble is you have too many problems.'

'Ah, every deviation from the normal is a problem. It's no easy matter trailing unbeaten paths.'

'Too unbeaten for my comfort. You've even renounced your own parents. How could I be sure you'll stick with me?'

'On the contrary. I'll be all the more attached to you.'

'That's what worries me sometimes,' she said in a fit of frankness 'Your ideas are too complicated for me, they really are. And you insist on applying them in everyday life I'm a simple person, without problems. I have faith and——'

'I have faith too,' he insisted, 'only it's not enmeshed in rites and rituals, feasts and fasts. No one need preach it to me every bloody Sunday morning. I can tell a thing or two to your dog-collared dunces: Christ and Christians are not the end-all and be-all of religion; and stop bickering about the commas and colons in the Bible and start looking for the pornography, war and rape in it.'

'How dare you say that about the best book ever put together?' she asked thumping the arm chair with her fist.

'That's why nobody reads it,' he said mockingly. 'Tell me the purpose of religion, the basic purpose.'

'To help people lead happy and meaningful lives.'

'But it always ends up creating discords and differences. Listen to an Anglican talk of Catholics, a Baptist of Methodists, a Christian of Jews, a Jew of Muslims, and a Muslim of Hindus. Remember the Crusades and the Jewish pogroms? Take your darling Christianity and its two major factions: Rome and Constantinople, then Rome and Luther, always more eager to finish each other off than practise love and charity. How did your Church treat Galileo, and Copernicus? And what about the Grand Inquisition? And——'

'That was a long time ago,' she snapped.

'When was Ireland partitioned?—and the Indian colony? The massacre of a million people. Women raped, houses burnt, shops looted, breasts cut, children butchered—all in the name of religion. Misery for millions, glory be to religion! We've had enough of it. All religions stink. They disgust me with their bloody hands, their perennial pettiness.'

'Enough,' she cried. 'You've told me enough.' With quivering hands she lit a cigarette, and took a few short, hurried puffs. 'You speak from your experience, I from mine. Even if all religions be bad and cruel, there's still God. That's above doubt, beyond all questioning.'

'*Nothing* is beyond questioning. God is just an idea. And glory be to Man who has conceived and perfected the idea.'

'You reject everything: all religions, God, everything. What will you teach your children?'

'When they're old enough let them study *all* religions and choose one *if* they want to. Why force a parent's religion on kids?'

'But what about the souls of children if they're brought up without a religion?'

'That's strictly a Catholic idea, and only one out of six people in the world is a Catholic. Even that's doubtful.'

After all the figures are given by the Catholic church itself.'

'Herself.'

'All right, herself. What difference does that make? To me it's a huge company that dispenses god in little tablets like a chemist selling aspirins.'

'Ooo!' Helen fumed. 'You *are* a cynic. Too much of a cynic for your own good.'

'Right now I feel too hoarse.'

'I'm not surprised.'

'How about some wine?'

'I'd love it.'

'Some bread too?'

'Enough of your sarcasm for an evening.'

He poured out wine. They sipped, smoking in silence, withdrawn in their worlds. An ash-butt fell on her corduroy dress. She brushed it away, lazily, then said, 'It's not my religious beliefs alone. My parents. I don't think they'll approve.'

'Why?'

'I'm afraid——'

'They'll say different race, if not an inferior one,' he said, slowly, deliberately.

'That's not so,' she said rather vehemently. 'That's not so. Even if I brought a young man from London they wouldn't approve.'

'Why don't we find out for ourselves? Let me meet your parents. I'll be good-mannered, courteous. Even shy. Of course, I can't bleach my skin.'

'Please stop being sarcastic,' she said appealingly. 'It's hopeless. I know my parents.'

'To be provincial.'

'All right, provincial, if you say so. If they're provincial, I am too.'

'With one difference: you fell in love with a dark stranger.'

'Say what you please.' She got up, poured herself more wine. 'You get angry and frustrated too soon. You're a born

haranguer. If left on a deserted island, you'd have hate sessions with your own shadow, I'm sure of that.'

'Angry yes, for there's enough to be angry about. But frustrated, no. I'm an incurable optimist. It's from my optimism that I draw warmth, the strength to live.'

'Then you don't need me,' she said, relieved. 'We may as well part now. You have your wild dreams to chase; I'm just an earthy creature.'

'Not tonight, not tonight,' he almost cried. 'We may have different stars to follow but that doesn't mean I love you less, or that I'll recover from it soon. Or that I'll recover from it at all.' He couldn't go on: his throat felt tight and painful. She bent forward to kiss his forehead. He turned away to hide the tears in his eyes. 'Nothing is more important in a man's life than a thought, an idea.'

Through his tear-filled eyes he saw her combing her hair before the dresser, looking away from him. He knew only too well that she had captivated his heart. But his mind was still his. It was free. And he would keep it so. He would not mortgage his mind for his heart. 'This is the last but one date of ours,' he mumbled.

She looked at him. 'All right,' she said, putting away the hair brush, 'if you smile for me.' Drawing near him she pressed his lips with her manicured fingers and let a smile out. 'You should smile often. You have such beautiful teeth.'

Dev felt forsaken again, a victim of his own blindness. He should have noticed that Helen joked irreverently about the nuns but never broke the rule about drinking. She had returned him his copy of *Stephen Hero* with a frozen expression; and she had called her shell-shocked god-father a 'fallen Catholic' with a tinge of contempt. Well, his mind had certainly noted that, but he had stifled it and upheld his heart. He had followed his heart blindly, unquestioningly. So had Helen. Only up to a point. Not all the way. For she was not prepared to offer herself to him cut out clean

from her past; whereas he was offering himself to her as he was, there and then.

He felt a mixture of self-pity and self-righteous anger at Helen as he wrote her his weekly epistle: 'All right, you stay secure in your snug little world, but at least pray for those who have to bear the brunt of struggles—long, weary and nerve wrecking . . . You have no guts, absolutely none. So keep yourself on that keel, you bitch! Live your simple, orderly life with no bends, no risks.'

Helen came to his room on Sunday wearing black jeans, a red checkered shirt and black and white sneakers. She had been cycling. Her cheeks looked more flushed than usual but not enough to mask the scowl on her face.

'That was a nice letter you wrote me,' she began. 'It's all right when you flay me orally. I can take it. But to write all that down, it reads awful.'

'You wrote me something awful once,' he said quietly.

'I know,' she said with a long sigh. She touched the wilted flowers in the vase, lifting them with her fingers, then let them droop. 'When we started I was stuck on you. You appeared so pliant and carefree. But somewhere in our relationship our roles changed. More and more I felt I was playing the tune.'

'No one is playing any one else's tune, miss,' he said grimly. 'In a way we all get what we deserve.' He paused to control his tears. He failed. An immense feeling of melancholia and self-pity enwrapped him, as he mumbled, 'Why did this happen to me? This affliction of love . . .'

'Pull yourself together, Dev,' she appealed to him, caressing his sobbing shoulders. 'You want to win the world, and here you are, tearful over a girl like me.'

'Because it's tearful to tear one's heart out.'

'But our minds are like rocks. That's where our boat of love was wrecked, as you said in your letter.'

He released himself from her arms, silent and withdrawn. He felt an emptiness, a vacuum in his soul, like a sponge without water. His tears had stopped. His mood was chang-

ing. He felt his body filling, energy spouting in him from silence, from nothing. He rose and began pacing up and down, feeling a strong dislike towards her for having reduced him to a crying state.

'Oh, I hate you, detest you,' he shouted suddenly at her, bending over her armchair. 'I feel like wincing your neck or twisting your arm, or bashing you against the wall.'

She looked up and saw a flickering of menace in his eyes: a cry for help might make things worse. 'Let's go out,' she said calmly, levering herself up with an arm. 'Let's get some fresh air.'

Outside the sun shone gaily. The wind blew. Helen slapped the saddle of her cycle. Dev took hold of the cycle as if it were his last survival kit. He walked with Helen up the avenue slowly, very slowly, wishing to postpone the moment of parting for as long as he could. They reached the end of the avenue. Helen stopped. Dev and the cycle stopped.

'I'd like to see you once more,' he mumbled

'Not if you threaten me.'

'I was only joking,' he said, off-handedly; but inside a tear simmered silently. The words had sprung from his subconscious: he must have meant them. His hands had tightened as he bent over her armchair. His whole being had been seized with an impulse to destroy her, to strangle her. Was that a moment of madness? 'It'll be the last time,' he assured her. 'Your college closes soon for Easter anyway.'

'All right. Friday, half-past seven,' she said. Then she remembered something. 'Our first date was on a Friday, wasn't it? Friday, the thirteenth.'

Then she was gone, a receding figure on a cycle.

Chapter Twelve

On Wednesday evening, Helen phoned Dev to tell him that her grandmother had a stroke, and that she was going home the next morning. 'Cheer up,' she said to him, 'there are plenty of girls around.'

'But the task of explaining oneself all over again. Besides, one needs that initial spark to light up, the sort we felt for each other. That's rare.'

'It is. Now probably, you can follow up on your plans for America.' She paused. 'We are still friends.'

'Are we?' he asked with a mixture of surprise and sarcasm.

'Yes, we are. I'll write to you from home.'

'And I'll look forward to reading it.'

'Good night, Dev. And God bless you!'

God bless you! Dev repeated, as he fell in the old arm-chair. So, finally Helen was gone—gone for good—he told himself, gazing at the landscape on the wall-calendar. Without realizing it, he began to pick his nose: it felt swollen and foreign under his finger. Pleasant incidents with Helen spun in his head like a roulette-wheel, the pointer stopping at their first love-making in that very room. An awful pain and longing mounted in his chest and he burst out crying. He switched on the radio to drown the sounds of his anguish, and threw himself on the bed. He must have cried for several minutes. He turned off the bedside lamp and curled under the blankets but did not close his eyes, aware that he should get up to wash his shirts as was customary for him on

Wednesdays. More tears fell as he remembered how Helen had once insisted on sewing buttons on his shirts and jackets.

In the morning he hadn't the will to leave his bed and get ready for the office. For the next two days he did nothing but sleep and watch television: he couldn't even bring himself to read—it was too much of an effort for his torpid body, his languid mind.

All Saturday he was feeling low. Wherever he was and whatever he did, he felt lonely. In the evening unable to bear his loneliness he took a bus to the railway station, but once in the midst of human bustle he shrank from it. He boarded a bus for the countryside and sat in the front seat on the upper deck—alone. Looking out he saw the town stretched out, clusters of light here and there; beyond the town the countryside, the stabs of light from homes, then the river and the darkness.

The bus was now out of town, speeding along a country road. He got off.

The country was desolate. Nothing moved. He looked up at the sky: it was the only witness of his solitude. But looking up for long hurt his neck. He looked around: everywhere the enormity of the black night, powerful in its veil. He felt it pressing in on him from all directions—and someone following him, someone big and strong and hideous. He quickened his pace—so did the man behind him. He broke into a sprint, and then in a sudden surge of fear he ran until he reached the outskirts of a village without even once daring to look back. He remembered the day in Multan when struck by a policeman's baton he had run with the same fear and panic; this time he had been hit by the baton of unconsummated love, and far more severely. To recoup from it he would have to return to light, to work.

At work his drawing board instruments felt blunt and alien, his stool colder and harder, the office larger and darker. His colleagues talked to him and he responded; but he couldn't understand why they should talk to him, or why

they should talk at all. All action seemed futile, all effort meaningless.

In spite of his best will, he could not concentrate on his work. His work suffered. He was making more mistakes than ever before, some of them very serious: he spent days designing a fifty-ton capacity vessel whereas he should have been designing a fifteen-ton one. He felt disturbed and guilty—but helpless. He was a man paralysed. He could sense that he was losing grip over himself but did not know how to arrest the process. He could not stop working. He dared not stop working. It was his only distraction from the severe neurosis that had afflicted him. But work alone was not enough to submerge the thoughts of Helen, and the letter she had promised him. A letter from her became crucial to him: it might prove to be the link through which he might win her back, the gust of wind that might set his smouldering hope alight again.

After a letterless week, he saw an envelope addressed to him.

‘This letter could have been written from a prison cell,’ Arjun began. ‘Only a miracle has kept me on the right side of the bars.’

‘It all started last week with a knock on my door at one o’clock in the morning. Before I had gathered my wits, a middle-aged woman reeking whiskey was undressing herself on my bed.’

‘“What do you want,” I asked, flabbergasted.’

‘“Don’t you love me any more?” she said, holding her panties in her hand. “You was so good last night, so good Only the coloured know it . . . jig-jig.”’

‘I have never been so embarrassed in my life—or so tempted, at the same time. Suddenly she went into a hysterical laugh. “Charlie, Charlie, no good, no good Charlie . . . whites no good.”’

‘“Get out!” I shouted nervously.’

‘“Rape! Rape!” she screamed.’

'I went mad with rage. I gripped her by the arm and tried to drag her out, but she clung to the bed, rumpling the sheets, shouting "Rape! Rape!"

'Two Englishmen in pyjamas came barging in—the door was unlocked. How lucky, I thought: that would assure them of my innocence. But I was mistaken. To them, I was the culprit—I "looked" it. They tried to hold me but I slipped out of their hands.

' "He hit me, hit me," the old bitch cried. "My dentures. Oh, my dentures!" She broke into a sob.

'By now the landing outside my room was crowded with people. They were trying to get at me, but I stood in a corner of my room, a large bowl in hand. I heard someone yell "Call the police!" and saw the stern-looking Pakistani (who lives two floors above my room) elbow his way inside. "What happened?" he barked at the old bitch at once. "Why so late?—why this big scene?" She cowered as if trying to ward off a blow.

'It was a matter of minutes before they realized that the drunken slut had caused all the commotion by knocking at the wrong door.

'That would have been the end of the affair, except that the woman—who apparently lives in this building and has sexual relationship with the Pakistani—was taken to a hospital two days ago. She was saved from gassing herself in the nick of time by the housekeeper who went to her room to tell her about a phone call for her.

'For the past two days the Pakistani and I have literally lived at the police station, and there might be more questioning in store for us.

'This incident has only strengthened my conclusion that under the façade of prosperity and cheerfulness the people here are not happy, the society is morally sick, the women unfaithful and neurotic. No amount of statistics will convince me out of this. Only our women are true and sane, and only by practising the Indian virtues of detachment and spirituality will the West find the happiness that eludes it.

'You can't imagine how anxious I am to return home.'

Poor Arjun, poor Dev. But at least Arjun was returning to the security of life in Bombay. And Helen was with her family apparently oblivious of Dev's anxiety. For him each day was like a turn of the screw in a wringing machine squeezing the last drops of tranquillity out of his mind. Was Helen *that* busy nursing her grandmother? Or had her grandmother died? Or was Helen one of the victims of the coach accident near Easlington that had taken place on the day of her travel? He phoned the Easlington hospital about her and was told that they had no patient by that name. What then was the matter with Helen?

Memories of Helen were revived more acutely than before. But as he examined the wreckage of his love affair minutely he saw that her parents, and not her religion, were the real hurdle; and that she had used religion as a smokescreen for her parents' objection.

Now, inadvertently, she was handing him a valid reason to visit Easlington. If he approached her parents directly and told them of his intentions, they would probably be moved by his dramatic gesture and set aside their objection. At least he had a fighting chance. So, in a curious way, he began wishing Helen's letter would not come.

It did not come.

On a Saturday morning he set out for Easlington. He could think of nothing but the scene of his meeting with her parents; and how he would behave with impeccable dignity and self-assurance. But once in the sombre streets of Easlington his earlier assurance left him. He could not possibly face Helen's parents on his own; he must meet them only in her presence, around high-tea time.

He spotted 'The Free Public Library' in High Street and stayed in until it closed at five o'clock.

Within minutes he was in Priestfield Street bounded by two long solid walls of grimy brick. Gazing dully at the white plastic 1-0-2 fixed to a green door he thought he was

dreaming. He touched the numbers: they were cold, real. Wasn't he being brash? There was still time to turn back. No, this might be the *door to his happiness for life*. He pressed the bell—a long hard push.

A large plumpish grey-haired woman of fifty opened the door. She cast him a cold eye: under the sunless sky he looked darker than usual.

'Is this the house of Mr Bradbury?' he mumbled.

'Yes,' she nodded, standing rigidly at the door like a sentry guarding a palace gate.

'May I come in a moment?' he asked, hesitant, bracing himself to hear a sharp 'What do you want?'—but she opened the door slowly, very slowly. Stepping inside, he introduced himself.

'How do you do, Mister . . .' she said with a sudden rush of courtesy. 'Mister——'

'Verma,' Helen said, descending the hallway stairs. 'Verma,' she repeated, looking at her bewildered mother.

A tea kettle whistled suddenly.

'Excuse me,' said Catherine Bradbury, 'the tea kettle.'

'Come and sit in the lounge,' Helen said to Dev.

Dev followed her to the lounge. She poked the fire, switched on the radio and brought him a pile of popular magazines as he sat in a chair.

'How is granny?' he asked.

'Much better. Thank you.'

'Why didn't you write?'

'I thought it best not,' she replied. She began blowing over her finger nails to dry the polish. 'Anyway, you're here now. You want to talk to my parents?'

'Of course.'

'I think you should,' she said. 'Excuse me, I must go and help mother.' She rushed out.

With her mind in turmoil Catherine Bradbury couldn't take in all Helen was saying, but when Helen repeated, 'Whatever his race or nationality, he's a nice young man, so please be polite to him, extra-polite,' she nodded

vigorously. 'You make the sandwiches while I go and talk to your father,' she told Helen. 'Use half-butter, half-margarine.' She wiped her hands on her apron, took it off and rushed upstairs to her husband Ned.

Ned listened to Catherine as if he were hearing a plot of some movie or TV play. 'I thought we had brought up our Helen the proper way, and the first time she leaves home, she goes messing around with a foreigner,' he said once, and then continued hearing Catherine quietly, looking grave, nodding and scratching the bald patch on his head every so often.

Dev was too excited to read, and soon he tired of surveying the lounge: it had the familiar old heavy furniture, the gaudy wall-paper, the radio and TV. He walked up to the large piano and looked at the music-sheets on a stand. Then he returned to his chair and stared at a picture of the Virgin with a light under it: the Virgin looked pallid, lifeless. Had he done the right thing, he wondered. If he walked out then, no one would miss him. He was weighing the idea in his mind when the six o'clock news broadcast jarred his thinking. He got up to lower the volume; he might as well leave.

The door opened. A tall multi-chinned man entered, and grasping his hand, said, 'I am Edwin Bradbury'

Dev mumbled his own name.

'I guess you'd be hungry,' Ned said. 'How about some tea with us?'

Dev nodded politely and followed Ned to the dining-room. He half-closed his eyes as Catherine said grace.

'It was a nice morning,' Ned said aloud, startling everyone at the table. 'But it's drizzling now.'

'Yes,' Dev said.

'The weather here must bother you, used to the Indian sunshine as you are.'

'Yes.'

The brief exchange of words did not dissolve the tension that filled the room like an unwelcome odour. Helen was

evidently taut and nervous. Wrinkles were multiplying on Catherine's face as she kept throwing sidelong glances at Dev and tightening her thin lips. Every noise, every movement tore into Dev's nerves: he was getting a headache. Only Ned seemed the least affected, the most absorbed in his food.

When they moved to the lounge, all eyes focussed on Dev.

'I don't know,' Dev began in an uncertain voice, 'whether Helen has told you or not, but we were seeing each other a lot in Cheverly. Quite seriously.' He wanted to look up and talk boldly, elegantly; instead, he raced through his words—'I've expressed my desire to marry her'—as if he were confessing a crime.

'That's a big surprise to me,' Ned remarked, nonplussed.

'Helen talked about you during the Christmas holidays,' Catherine said calmly. 'We decided it was best for her to break off the relationship. I thought that was the end of it' She gave Helen an arraigning stare.

So that was it: mother's directive that led to Helen's note and her decision not to contact him while in London, Dev inferred. 'Yes,' he said, '*she did make the attempt, but we became friends again. We've been seeing each other at least twice a week.*' We even became lovers again, he wanted to add.

Catherine's dazed eyes fell on Helen, cold and disapproving. Helen shifted hers to the carpet—and acquired the posture that had drawn Dev to her at the Union Hall. 'What should be done then?' Catherine asked with an undertone of exasperation.

Helen raised her head, about to speak.

'What religion are you?' Catherine asked Dev, throwing back her hostile head.

'None,' he replied.

Catherine and Ned went rigid with shock; Helen smiled faintly.

Dev regretted the blunder he had just committed. 'I'm a student of all religions,' he should have said, or 'I was brought up in a Hindu family': anything less than outright

irreligiosity. 'I told her I'd become a Christian,' he said, hoping to soften his earlier bluntness. But nothing doing: Catherine and Ned still rigid with shock, looking hostile, tight-lipped. 'Why go through all this *again*?' he cried.

'We don't understand,' Catherine said sharply, annoyed by Dev's loudness. 'Didn't she tell you of the pit manager's son? They've been love birds since they were in school. They'll be engaged at Whitsun; and next summer when Ted gets his degree they'll be married in the Church.'

'I'm sorry,' Helen said at last, looking at the shrunken face of Dev. 'I tried to ward you off without hurting your feelings, but you made it difficult for me—sticking to me like that. Finally I thought we had wrapped up the affair. Now this. It's a mess, I'm afraid.'

Sticking to me like that—the words began like a snowball rolling off a mountain peak, gathering momentum, gaining speed, growing bigger and bigger, rolling faster and faster—and, bang! The impact on Dev was demonic. He felt crushed.

No, it couldn't be, he assured himself: Helen, to become someone else's wife soon, in love with another man while she spent hour after hour in his company, in his arms, in his bed. No, there was a mistake. Or was there? Was it a fraud then? A huge sinister fraud. The whole world, a fraud, a lie—and Helen, a part of it. He did not want to believe it. It hurt him, pained him. He felt an impulse to cry out, to wail, to kneel before them, imploring: 'Please, please, give me Helen. Give me Helen. She is my life, my light. She is my breath. Give me my life, my breath. She loves me, adores me. Only you loosen your grip on her. Let her be. Then you'll see how much she loves me, how well she understands me. And I her. Pleeceeease Mister and Missus Bradbury, in the name of love and life and common decency . . . please . . . please . . .' He could say no more, think no more: he went numb, deaf, dumb. He did not see, did not feel, did not hear. Then a wild impulse lifted him out of his seat, carried

him to the hallway and put him in the street—all in a moment.

A few paces and then he slumped against a wall.

His room at the Railway Hotel was dark and dingy, but he did not notice it: all he wanted was a place to lie down to reconstruct what had happened.

It had been religion with her parents too. The religious fanatics! That was the trouble with religion—always dividing people. And the taboos: Helen would eat only egg-dishes on Fridays. The Beauty Queen. 'The sheepish Beauty Queen! An eddy of hatred for her spread through his mind as he realized the anguish and humiliation she had caused him, the fraud she had played on him. A surge of self-pity rose in him like a high tide under full moon, and the next moment he heard himself sob. He felt flooded with a vast sense of grief which mellowed him, dissolving the hard lumps of resentment, the liquid pouring out of his eyes and nose.

At last he felt clean and subdued. He thought of going to bed, but it seemed too early. He went down.

It was a long time before he got a pint of beer in the crowded lounge of the hotel, but he couldn't leave. Mere contact with other men was essential to him—the noise, the warmth, the forgetful flight of time.

In his cold room, however, time hung heavily on his hands. He put the only shilling piece he had in the gas-meter and held a light to the fireplace. Nothing happened. Should he go down and demand that something be done? Better not; it was almost midnight.

He crouched under the blankets but could not sleep. It was very cold, with rain pelting against the windows. He moved to the armchair and wrapped himself with layers of blankets and bedsheets. He began counting backwards to induce sleep but failed. It was quarter to three.

He dozed off to a dream filled sleep in which he saw a series of valleys, caves and gorges, and—suddenly—his

father, bare-chested, sitting cross-legged on top of a snow-covered mountain; he began climbing to reach his father—a locomotive whistle from the railway station woke him up: 4.30.

He glanced into a mirror. His unshaven face made him look haggard. His eyes were red, the eyelids puffy. His mouth tasted like a sewer. He had a splitting headache. He longed for a cigarette—and a key to his dream. What were those valleys and peaks? And his father there? He hadn't thought of his father for a long time. He had thought of no one but Helen. Helen, a sham, a trick.

He reached his car in High Street but did not know where to drive. He couldn't go back to Cheverly, at least not just then. He longed to go away, faraway—to some unknown, unfamiliar place. He counted his cash. Plenty!

On the highway, he stopped at the first service station he saw, and bought petrol, cigarettes and tea. He turned around to travel north. The hot tea made his senses sharper—but not for long. It was raining hard; he had to shut up the car. That made him drowsy, fogged his glasses. For moments he couldn't see. He began dozing off at the steering wheel, short spasms of uncontrollable sleep. To revive his senses he sang loudly: snatches of old Hindi songs. Different songs but the same theme: a lover pining away in the separation of his beloved, bemoaning her betrayal. He himself was that lover, and he sang from the depths of his heart. As he sang, thoughts of Helen returned and re-formed into a cloud of melancholia which, growing heavier and colder, burst upon him with the impact of a monsoon. He felt drenched, and shuddered: his hands shook, his feet twitched. He gripped the steering wheel while he pressed his feet down. The car zoomed; its frame shook; he felt frightened and pressed harder. He felt the agony of something in him breaking, a call rising from the dark recesses of his mind, from a figure draped in dark waving, promising rest, eternal rest—if he let the steering wheel go. Let go. Let go! the call rose louder and louder. He did. A

black car swerved sharply before him. He gripped the steering wheel, jammed the brakes. The car skidded. His spell was broken. He saw the hot vapours rising, in front of him, the fumes of an overheated engine. But he did not stop.

He kept going—slowly. He opened a window to gain vision, to clear his glasses. He was in the Pennine range. He swerved to the left into a small road.

Already he was shivering with another fear, but he did not want to stop. He must go on. He must keep his eyes on the road. He must not think. But how could he stay indifferent when he was—yes, yes, he must say it—losing his mental balance. Yes, he was. He had had lapses—not just once or twice, but four times. He wanted to wring Helen's neck in his room: he had *really* wanted to. Then, the way he ran on that night in the countryside imagining someone behind him when there was in fact no one. And those words he spoke to Helen's parents, the frantic, hysterical manner of his pleading. But was he sure he spoke the words? Wasn't he imagining this? What about those bizarre moments of delirium on the highway when he had pressed the accelerator with closed eyes and withdrawn his hands into his coat-pockets? And that figure draped in black calling from the bottom of a pit—or was that a negative copy of his father, bare-chested, on top of a mountain, turned upside down.

Glancing in the mirror of his car he noticed a quizzical look in his eyes, the kind insane people have. He had feared insane people since his visit to a lunatic asylum in Multan as a boy. Now he was becoming one himself. Was he insane already? Or was he on the verge? That was the trouble with insanity: the person suffering from it could not tell. Living with a maimed hand or leg was all right, but to live with a rotten head; he might as well be dead.

Better dead than mad. No life, no insanity. No life, no heartbreaks. Goodbye, life! Troubles, problems, failures, frustrations, futile fermentations, thorns without roses: what else did you offer me, life? Yes, he would respond to the call of the bottom—look for a jumping point.

He saw one. He stopped the car and ambled to the precipice, surveying the scene with the eye of a landscape painter. Standing at the edge, he felt an urge to look down but curbed it: the sight might deter him from jumping. He thought of the stories and movies in which the prospective suicides retreated at this point. Did he have the supreme courage to take his own life? He would soon know.

But how could he? For he would be dead then. How ironic! With a delicious perversion he realized the heavy burden under which Helen would live the rest of her life; that would teach her not to entangle herself with Eastern men like him, who were gifted to lose themselves in a single thought, a singular emotion. Thinking of his family, he felt sad. They would be numbed with sorrow, particularly his mother who had recently lost her husband. It was ironic that his father had moved up, to the Himalayas, whereas he was going to go down. He wondered how well his father was standing up to the chill of the Himalayas, when he felt a hand on his shoulder. 'Hey mate, is that your car?' The tone was brusque.

Dev went pale as he looked into the stern face of a policeman who was equally astonished to encounter a brown face. 'Yes.'

'And what d'you think you're doing here?'

'Just watching the scenery,' Dev replied, withdrawing his shaking hands into his coat-pockets.

'A nice day for that, in this blooming drizzle. Move your car from the "No Parking" zone. Quick.'

'Yes, officer.'

'You were driving like a maniac on the main road. Show me your papers when you're out of the zone.'

The confrontation with the policeman brought Dev right to the centre of reality—the world of driving licences, insurance papers and driving offences. He did not go into hysterics or shake or bawl out at the policeman; he showed the right amount of awe for authority, he knew exactly where in the glove compartment to find the insurance papers and

the log-book. He was quite sane then; there was no basis for his fears of hallucinations, he concluded, looking at himself in the mirror again.

Seized by an impulse he clipped his moustache with a pair of scissors, and dressed his hair differently.

He would be a new man, begin a new lease on life.

PART FOUR

Chapter Thirteen

New face, new hair style, and a new room for Dev. And a few days later, a new office—marked 'Drawing Section'—one floor above the old. Dev grudged the extra 18 steps but they were worth taking. In a bright warm room, the adjustable drawing boards and upholstered chairs were evenly placed; and he felt one among his colleagues. His group leader Raymond Reynolds was friendly, even garrulous. They had often shared a table in the canteen with Toby, a young friend of Ray's.

In the canteen, once, Ray said, rather light heartedly, 'Most people think I'm squint eyed. I'm not. I'm one eyed'

'Are you?' Dev asked, surprised

'Just look at it,' Ray said, thrusting his face in Dev's direction. Dev looked: it was his left eye. 'That's why girls don't like me.'

'Come off it,' Toby said, 'You like Kempton girls.'

'Just one,' Ray said, baring his yellow teeth 'She knows how I lost my eye, as a fitter's mate. It's hard work on the shop floor, and noisy as hell, hammer blows, pneumatic drills, sparks flying off grinding machines. I was working at my bench, filing away, when a steel chip flew off from the floor and hit me in the eye, right in the eye.' He cupped his left eye, and sipped tea. 'But the funniest part came when I returned to work,' Ray went on. 'The managing director called me in, looking sad and sympathetic, droning away in his Oxford accent. There's a little paper work to be finished, Mister Reynolds, he says. He pushes this paper forward,

holds out his Parker 51. I knew he was up to some trick: the Union lawyer had warned me not to sign anything before showing it to him. Maybe, my father'd like to see it, I says, very quiet and polite like. That's all right, he says; there's no rush about it. He slides the paper away but his smile is still on. That's when they sent me upstairs to be an apprentice draughtsman.'

'And upstairs there's no union,' Toby said, stirring his tea.

'That's why we've been doing slave labour every Saturday morning since October,' Ray grumbled. 'It's April now.'

'And no relief in sight yet,' Toby added.

'There's enough work for fifteen draughtsmen. But they only have twelve, including you and that Dutchman,' Ray said to Dev.

'Old time exploitation in new welfare state,' Dev remarked bitterly.

He felt a bitterness every Saturday morning when he had to get up early and work without getting paid overtime. And yet, in a curious way, he did not mind the unjust barter. For, left to itself, his time became a worm eating away his guts, his peace of mind. For the evenings, he found a job filling chewing-gum vending machines. The job paid little; but again, it helped kill his time.

Days passed, evenings and nights: furious work in the office, rushing in and out of his car in the evenings.

But there were still the weekends when the office doors stayed shut and the vending machines full. Saturday evenings were the worst. Enveloped in gloom he would shut himself up with lights out, noise out, seeking in the darkness of his room the peace of mind he had lost, trying to discover himself—what he was and where, what he was going to be, where and how—but whether he tried to trace his past or plot his future, he got sucked into the whirlpool of Easlington, again and again, unable to spin out, to move forward or slide backward, to sink at rest or stay afloat. A whirlpool, a continuously revolving door, where fact and

fiction, fantasy and reality seemed so intermingled he did not know whether he was on his way out or in.

He ate well yet he was turning pale and lantern-jawed. When he met his eyes in a mirror, he could see their lustre gone, the sunshine in him fading. Now and then he would be talking to a colleague in the office and suddenly he would feel dazed and stare at him quizzically, the whole office going blank before him.

It's all over, he would tell himself often. All over. Time is running out, your time. Forget her. She was a shadow, a myth—worse, a fraud. Yet the words went unheeded. She was *still* with him: HELEN.

One fine spring evening, he had just filled a vending machine, when looking up he saw a group of nuns approaching. He stood there rigid with clenched fists, a fire of agony spreading through him. They passed him. 'Witches!' he cried, and spat bitterly.

He walked toward his car with a lighter, freer pace as if the spit had purged him of his sense of gloom and despair.

In a sudden spurt of energy he scrawled a letter to the American Information Agency for a list of universities offering Management Science degrees; he shaved and dressed, ready to go out. Dancing. Once again he was feeling bold, resilient, ready to face life—slights, rebuffs, insults, failures, anything.

But once on the Town Hall dance floor, he found himself sapless, listless. At last, he approached an oldish girl with enormous breasts and false eye-lashes. His sad withdrawn face aroused her pity; his name David and Anglo-Indian parentage aroused her curiosity. 'How does it feel to be in England?' she asked him.

'As being in India,' he replied. 'Like a man made of two worlds, neither of which he could call his own.'

'A split personality.'

'Which needs elaboration over a cup of tea.'

'I'd love to, but not now; I'm meeting a friend here any moment,' she said. Dev looked disappointed. 'Why don't you

phone me some time? Number 87843. Susan Williams.' There was a pleasant warmth in her voice which Dev did not fail to notice.

He left.

An early evening was dissolving into a smudgy dusk but the sky was cloudless, and the air warm. Outside Mac's guest house a lodger stood with his head buried under the lifted hood of his car. Next to him, parked on the wrong side, stood Tony's station-wagon. Dev entered the lounge of the guest house, expectant.

'Surprised?' Tony said, getting up from a chair. 'I got a brain wave while driving to London. Arjun is leaving for Bombay tomorrow, you know? And he's taking my big set home for me.'

'But they have no TV in India.'

'I'm keeping the TV; the rest is going.'

'It'd cost a fortune there, a set like that.'

'At least three thousand rupees,' Tony said. He pulled out his wallet and searched it, then began burrowing into his pockets frantically. 'Jesus!' he cried, 'I forgot the receipt for the set.'

'Do you have to have it?'

'Absolutely. Otherwise, you know Indian Customs Officers. They'd tax it two hundred per cent on some imaginary figure. Don't worry. We'll go back to Kempton. You're coming, aren't you?'

'Where to?'

'London. I'd like you to come. Today is Friday. I thought you might like to see Arjun off at Tilbury.'

'I'd like to. But, right now, you're going back to Kempton.'

'Yes, but we'll go from there directly.'

'Let me get my things then.'

Tony was in a great hurry. When he reached his house he parked his car at an angle, and raced to the living room. He pushed the door open—and was astounded: Neil bending over Monica on the couch! It was much too sudden for Neil

as well—the noise from the TV had drowned all others—but he lifted himself swiftly on his palms. As Tony pounced on Neil, breaking his glasses, dragging him down on the floor over the upturned couch, Monica was caught between their wrestling bodies. But she managed to worm herself out and stood up horrified: Tony was sitting on Neil's stomach pounding at his bleeding face! Then, spurred by his own momentum he bent over Neil, crushing Neil's hands with his knees, and tightened his hands around Neil's throat. Monica shrieked. Distracted, Tony looked up. Neil raised his legs in the air and trapped Tony's neck between his knees. Tony took his hands from Neil's throat and tried to part Neil's knees. Neil opened his legs and pushed Tony down with his feet—and as Tony fell on his back, Neil rose and ran. Tony ran after him. But it was too late: Neil's car was already in motion

'You! You bloody bitch!' Tony shouted at Monica, banging the lounge door shut. 'You get into that station-wagon. NOW!'

'But I have the final exam on Monday,' she protested mildly.

'Exam or hell! You get into that station-wagon,' he yelled. She ducked her head fearing Tony's fists and ran. Dev felt embarrassed: he wished he were somewhere else.

Tony began arranging the furniture. 'I'm sorry,' he muttered to Dev. 'It's a mess, a real mess. Please wait in the station-wagon, if you don't mind. I'll be there in a minute. I must find the damned receipt.'

Dev came out and saw Monica smoking quietly in the station-wagon, her elbow resting on the window.

The journey to London was one long stretch of silence, unbroken, even when they got out to eat at a wayside restaurant. They rested for a while in the station-wagon, and entered London in the early morning.

'I have a surprise for you,' Tony told Arjun in his room at Pawson Crescent. 'Dev is here too.'

'Is he? The next thing you'll tell me you're taking me to

Tilbury. In your wagon.' Arjun gave a disarming smile; Tony couldn't refuse. 'The ship sails at four, but we should leave early. Have to book your set.'

'But not before I get a hearing-aid for my father.'

Tony left Dev with Arjun and, together with Monica, drove off to buy a hearing-aid. Tony felt a powerful itch to fire a series of questions at Monica but curbed it: driving in London on a Saturday morning demanded all his attention.

Arjun poured out coffee for Dev from his thermos, and listened to Dev's account of the incident at Tony's place. 'Cheap Christians,' Arjun sneered. 'What else to expect of them? Such things happen daily in Mahim and Bandra where they live in Bombay. My cousin used to tell me; he's a lawyer there.'

Dev wished he had told Arjun nothing. 'Is triple M coming to see you off?' he asked suddenly.

'Mabel, you mean. Yes, she was going to, along with her child-care officer boyfriend, but suddenly she had to go to Edinburgh. Some office job. Do you hear from her?'

'Now and then.'

Tony came back. They loaded the station-wagon with Arjun's luggage, and were wondering who should sit where, when, suddenly Arjun asked: 'Where's Monica?'

'She?' Tony responded uneasily. 'She . . . she's gone back. Gone back to Kempton. Wasn't feeling well, you see. Cramps. That's why.'

Arjun and Dev looked at Tony, sceptical.

'Stop staring, will you?' Tony said brusquely. 'I must keep my head. I'm driving—that too in the middle of London with all these bloody no-entry signs. I've had no sleep and my head feels like a ton of lead.'

'Want some coffee?' Arjun asked, taking out the thermos from his Air India grip.

'No thanks.'

Tony was not surprised to find Monica missing when he

returned home late at night. He knew where to find her—at her parents' house. She would be all alone there: her father was abroad, and her sister was on her holiday. At first he thought it best to sleep over the matter, but then he began speculating about her whereabouts. The least he could do was to make sure she was actually at her parents' place.

He drove there but parked at the end of the street. At her parents' place he found the lights on in the bedroom facing the street. He rang the bell.

Someone came down to the door but instead of opening it peered through the letter slot, and asked: 'Who is it?'

Tony did not reply.

'Who is it?'

Still he did not reply

The light on the landing went off. It was the ultimate in frustration to be standing outside one's in-laws' home, unable to enter, Tony fumed. He felt depressed and enraged. But he did not want to make a scene in the street. He crept through the alley next to the house, and tried to raise the kitchen window. It lifted. He jumped in quietly, tiptoed to Monica's room, and opened it with a start.

Monica was startled, but managed not to cry 'So it was you,' she said, sitting up in her bed. 'I thought so.' She closed the book she had been reading and put it on the bedside chest.

'Just what exactly do you mean—disappearing like that?' Tony asked, flushing with anger. 'The moment I go to get the hearing-aid you slip out like that. Did you realize there was £200 worth left unlocked in that wagon? It could have disappeared in a second. It was London, not a friendly little town like Kempton.'

Monica said nothing, picked up her book, opened it and began scribbling in it.

'Just what exactly do you mean?' Tony repeated, putting his hands on his hips. 'You can't get away with it by keeping mum.'

'I didn't want you to send that set home in any case,' she said quietly.

'What about that Neil affair? How long has that been going on?' he shouted.

'What do you mean how long? If you calm down I'll tell you everything.'

'Calm down, calm down. I catch you in the act, and you ask me to calm down.'

'What act? We were doing nothing.'

'You were about to.'

'This is what happened,' she began as impassively as she could. 'I don't think you'll believe me, but this is what happened.'

'Hold it,' he said, giving a policeman's stop sign. 'I want some whiskey to be able to go through this.'

'Whiskey is the ruin of us all. That's what we had that evening.'

Tony returned from the kitchen with a bottle of whiskey and ice-cubes.

'You know that evening—father's car was out of order, and you left me at Raddington Tech before going to London,' Monica began. 'Well, Neil has bought a car, but he's driving on an "L". A neighbour of his with a proper licence sits with him, because he also goes to evening classes.' She paused to light a cigarette, but refused whiskey from Tony. 'Well, his neighbour was sick so Neil took a chance and drove to the college on his own. When he was in the classroom he asked me if I'd sit with him when he drove back. He really looked scared, because, you see, earlier in the evening he almost ran into a car at the traffic-lights. That's how.'

'How what? How did he get into our house?'

'Oh yes, I asked him in for a cup of tea. Out of politeness.'

'And he politely accepted.'

'Yes, I was surprised myself,' she said innocently.

'You were; were you?' he asked tauntingly. He was up on his feet staring at her, moving slowly forward to the edge

of her bed. 'So you drew the curtains to have tea with the gallant gentleman who had offered you a lift. You really want me to believe that?' he cried. In a moment of frenzy, he flung the whiskey at her and let the glass go. She tried to roll over to get off the bed to stand up—but he was already over her, holding her down, shouting: 'Whose baby was it? Whose?'

'What baby?' she yelled. 'Let me go! Let me go, you swine!'

'Whose baby was it?' he cried again, and grasping her arms shook her frantically. 'WHOSE?'

There was a series of angry thumps against the wall behind the bed; then a volley of angry incoherent words.

'The neighbours,' she mumbled, 'you've woken up the neighbours.'

He threw her on the bed, picked up the whiskey bottle and left the house.

Monica got up, still crying, and went to the dresser. She sat there, elbows on the dresser, her head resting in her palms, staring at the laconic, severe face of her mother, glaring through a picture frame. 'I miss you, mother, I do,' she said, slowly, painfully. 'If only you hadn't been so much against Tony from the beginning. That's what made him so delicious to me, the forbidden fruit . . . And other men in marriage are forbidden too; so there's the sweetness . . . That's the truth, mother . . . No, you don't believe me. You never did, did you? . . .'

Witnessing the encounter between Monica and Tony had a salutary effect on Dev. It was like a man without shoes meeting a man without feet. Dev was glad to be unmarried if this was what marriage had to offer. But there was no staying away from girls. He needed their company the warmth of a woman's breasts, and big bosomed Susan Williams was growing fond of him. In the company of Susan, he became a man, a loving mating male; in the company of his colleagues he became a gadfly, a centre of

controversy. He gave up his vending-machine job and began learning tennis under Ray's guidance.

Ray had put some life in the sagging spirit of the company's Sports Club. He arranged a day trip to London to cheer the local rugby team and even got the draughtsmen exempted from Saturday overtime. Dev went along with Ray, Toby, Will and others. They sat in the rear of the coach, sipping bottled beer.

'What did you find different when you first came to England?' Ray asked Dev. 'My cousin was born in India. When she first came here she was fascinated by the department stores.'

'She must have missed the sunshine, the Indian summer,' Dev said.

'Where would you be going for your holidays?' Will asked Toby.

'Butlin's.'

'So you believe those telly ads,' Will said.

'I don't like Billy Butlin,' Ray said. 'It was wrong of him to bar Egyptians in the cross-channel competition. It's wrong to mix sports with politics.'

'Look at lefties asking for a boycott of the South African cricket team,' Will said while Toby was saying, 'We had nice holidays in Germany last year. In the Baden-Baden area. They have wonderful beer there.'

'German beer is the best,' Dev said with an air of authority.

'How do you know?' Will asked curtly: Dev's cockiness had always irritated him.

'You'd have known had you stayed in your little Holland, during the war,' Dev replied acidly. 'You'd have tasted their boots as well.' He had old scores to settle with Will: now, at last, his chance had come.

'Thank heavens, we kept them out of our island,' Ray said.

'I wish they had occupied it, given you the experience of

carrying someone on your back—the way dark people carried you.'

'Oh cranky, are you still grumbling about your past slavery?' Toby asked, irked.

'We brought you civilization,' Will declared.

'Civilization, my foot,' Dev flared. 'I know your civilization; millions for weapons research and penny collection boxes for cancer cure. When a man uses a bow and arrow he is uncivilized; but when he drops a sleek hydrogen bomb, instant death for thousands, he's civilized.'

'But you killed a couple million in savage rioting,' Will said sharply.

'Out of four hundred million,' Dev retorted. 'Less than one half of one per cent of the population. How many were killed in the Spanish civil war? Or in Poland? As a per cent of the total population?'

'That was political, not religious,' Will snapped.

'How political was the gassing of six million Jews?'

'That was Hitler,' Ray said. 'We fought him.'

'But he was *your* civilization, white civilization.'

'They wanted him to grow strong and fight old Joe—only he doublecrossed them, the reactionaries of Europe,' Ray said.

'But old Joe was *your* civilization too: how he butchered his peasants!'

'And you shot your leader, Gandhi,' Will pointed out.

'So did the Americans—Lincoln, the very man who made them a nation.'

'Americans are skunks anyway,' Will said

'But for their help the mustachioed maniac would have destroyed you all. Anyway, according to the English snobs, all lower classes are skunks. And that includes you all,' Dev said with a sweeping gesture.

'And you'd be the skunkiest of us all, you coolie,' Toby said good humouredly.

'We'll let you serve us when we stop to have a snack,' Ray added, grinning.

Dev smiled with them, for through these arguments he was, essentially, serving himself, whipping up a zest for living, sharpening his morbid, blunt soul against the grinding stone of his intellect.

The verbal altercations between Tony and Monica, however, began as arguments and quickly escalated into quarrels, unfettered exercises in inflicting pain and hurt. There were days of silence between them, the two of them in the same room, same bed, lonely together, with not a word exchanged, and then a conflagration, words flying off like sparks, their tongues like lances, jabbing, piercing, hurting until they tired and dozed off, or one of them retreated, dramatically, by walking out of the room or out of the house.

Once Tony drove clean out of the town itself—to Cheverly to see Dev. 'We have reached the end, the absolute end,' he told Dev grimly. 'It's beginning to get on my nerves: her, the house, the whole town.' He threw up his arms in despair and was quiet for a while. 'This is how it is. We had quarrels before: which newly married couple doesn't? Partly her mother was to blame: she never really accepted me as her son-in-law, never stopped egging her on against me.'

'Most mothers are like that, I suppose: possessive.'

'Only up to a point. Anyway, the situation never got out of hand because her father would step in and smooth up the matters. He has a knack for it. The only trouble is he isn't around now; he's taking a nine-month cruise around the world. He was feeling gloomy after his wife's death.'

'Still a few weeks to go then.'

'Yes,' Tony said absently, staring at the back of his hands resting in his lap. 'There are two courses open to me: I could ask for a transfer to London, have a change of scene, or I could go home, a few weeks' holiday. But my problem would be explaining Monica's absence to my parents. So it comes down to me getting my marriage straightened out first.'

'I guess so.'

'But the question is: how? How exactly?' Tony asked, perplexed. 'How exactly? Will you testify for me?'

'What for?'

'The Neil affair,' Tony replied hesitantly, and trailed off. Dev nodded vigorously. Encouraged, Tony began again, 'I don't know much about divorce in England, but I'm certain adultery is the surest ground. Now, either Neil consents to being a co-respondent or——'

'But will he? He's a Catholic.'

'I know, I know. That's the problem.' Tony wrung his hands in despair. 'That means we'll have to prove this by evidence, witnesses and so on—the whole paraphernalia. Will you say you saw them . . . in the act?'

'It's a horrible thought,' Dev replied, not daring to look up. 'Going through all those dirty details.'

'Quite. Doubly disgusting for our Indian minds. But we have to follow British law, the Western values.'

'Maybe, all that won't be necessary.'

'I don't know, I just don't know,' Tony said in a fit of exasperation. 'I don't know the law. I don't want to go to a lawyer and discuss the sex life of my wife. I don't want to discuss this with anyone.' He paused, then began slowly, 'You are different: you are a friend, a fellow-Indian. Besides, you saw the whole thing that evening.'

'I had seen them together once before.'

'Where?' Tony's voice boomed.

'At the Grand Hotel, Cheverly, long time ago.'

'Why didn't you tell me then?' Tony's voice held anguish and censure 'Why didn't you?'

'I wasn't sure, Tony. I mean I didn't see them together hand in hand or in the station-wagon, or anything like that. While I was talking to Monica in a corridor of the hotel, I thought I saw someone looking like Neil coming out of the saloon-bar and then shoot back again. I wasn't sure. And, somehow, one doesn't think of one's friend's wife as adulterous: it's always someone distant and unfamiliar—in films and novels.'

'But this is real, and very near to me, anyway. Even a divorce will not solve my problems. I could only get a civil divorce: the Church will never dissolve our marriage. She never does, except for the very rich. And my parents, they're such devout Catholics they'd disinherit me the moment I get a divorce.'

'It's a terrible mess,' Dev agreed. 'Perhaps you should get away from Kempton for a while, and think over the matter coolly. You don't have to fly off to Bombay.'

'So I was thinking,' Tony said, receiving Dev's suggestion with relief. 'Monica and I had planned holidays in France this summer,' he added, with a certain nostalgia. 'She was dying to see Paris. Have you been there?'

'Just passed through it on my way from Marseille.'

'Then why don't we go?'

'We?'

'Yes, you and I,' Tony said heartily. 'You don't look too well yourself.'

'I'm all right—just a touch of cold.' Dev did not want Tony to enter his inner world: his own troubles were not for sharing.

'Have you had your holidays?'

'Not yet.'

'Then let's go . . . tomorrow.'

'All right, then,' Dev said, adjusting his tie. 'Tonight, we'll go dancing.'

'Good. Haven't danced since that dinner-dance with you and Pamela.'

'We'll go to the Trapeze, the newest dance-hall in some dark alley. They do some wild dancing there, I've heard.'

'And I'm all ready to go wild,' Tony said, shaking his arms and legs to an imaginary jazz tune.

His enthusiasm was premature. When they reached the Trapeze, they saw a 'Europeans Only' sign and a few pickets carrying placards, 'A Pure Race Does NOT Exist', 'Remember, we fought Hitler?' A policeman stood by, arms

folded. 'It's bloody ironic to have African dances and bar Africans from coming in,' Dev said.

Dev and Tony stood across the street, watching couples and groups arrive and go inside. Now and then, one of them would bark 'Nigger' or 'Wogs' at the pickets before going in. A small line was forming.

'Let's go and stand in line—and see what happens,' Dev suggested.

'What's the use?'

Dev noticed a mulatto with a white girl join the line, and said to Tony: 'Watch him.'

'He hasn't a chance. Let's go.'

'Just wait and see.'

They saw the mulatto and the white girl cross the entrance door. Within moments, there was a jostling of bodies—and a scuffle broke out inside. The policeman tried to enter—but too late: two ushers emerged carrying the mulatto under his arms, and threw him on the pavement. The mulatto got up and headed for the door but was checked by the policeman who gripped him by the elbow while the white girl pulled him by the jacket, crying 'No, no.'

'I'm European,' the mulatto shouted. 'I was born in England. I'll show you my passport.'

'He isn't white enough for the lilies,' Dev flashed. He was about to leave in disgust when he saw Will deBruin wearing dark glasses appear. What was he up to, Dev wondered, as he turned sideways to obscure his own identity. When he noticed that Will was gone, Dev crossed the street and asked the Chinese picket: 'What did the man with dark glasses want?'

'Newspaper reporter,' the picket replied.

'Reporter? He's a bloody draughtsman,' Dev said. The picket shrugged. 'What did he want?'

'Just our names and addresses; what we thought of the colour bar. A report for the paper.'

'That man can't put two sentences together, much

less write a report,' Dev said. 'Can I take one of your placards?'

'You can take both if you like,' the picket said. 'I could do with a cup of tea.'

When the picket was gone, Tony said, 'Why are we getting involved in this?'

'Because it concerns us all—you, me, all of us wogs.'

'Don't you and me have enough troubles of our own?'

'There are personal troubles and social ones. Right now I'm doing my bit for our social troubles.'

'Aren't we going to Paris?'

'That's tomorrow'

'There may be trouble here'

'So much the better,' Dev said. Then he smiled at Tony, 'Don't be an alarmist, man. Why don't you wait in the pub, around the corner? I'll see you there in half an hour . . . at least before it closes.'

Chapter Fourteen

Paris with its wide tree-lined boulevards, fast-moving traffic, quays, and picturesque bridges was in such contrast to cramped and sombre London that Tony and Dev soon stopped comparing the two. Viewing it from the height of the Sacre Coeur, and attending a Mass there, Tony almost cried with emotion: his Catholic spirit had been touched. The Eiffel Tower had much less effect on him. At the Cathedral Notre Dame, Tony sent out numerous post cards to his friends in Bombay and Goa.

Dev, however, was more interested in sitting around the cafés of the Left Bank, even though he could hardly understand the conversations. Tony knew a bit of French, but not enough to act as an effective interpreter.

One afternoon they sat in a café on the Boulevard St. Germain, Tony eating his customary Gruyere sandwich, Dev glancing at his copy of *The Guardian*, when Tony said, 'That's not how you'll learn French. Start reading the headlines in French papers, or the captions in picture magazines.'

'Will you help me with it?'

'As much as I can.'

Dev went off and returned with a copy of the *Paris Match* with a picture of an F.L.N. leader on its cover. 'There,' he said, opening the magazine where the article on F.L.N. began.

Tony read aloud, but Dev would get the gist of a paragraph long before Tony had reached its end. 'You've already picked up so much,' Tony remarked.

'Not really. It's just that I know so much about the F.L.N., the Algerian freedom movement. They've now brought their sabotage activities to French soil, something the I.R.A. could never do well on British soil.'

'What's the I.R.A.?'

'The Irish Republican Army, an arch enemy of the limeys,' Dev replied. 'Neil used to be in it.'

'Neil?' A wave of anger passed over Tony.

'So he claimed.'

Dev's words had thrown a switch in the mind of Tony. His skull roared and buzzed with ideas, all centred around Neil. Soon afterwards he became impatient to leave Paris. He did not have to press it hard on Dev: their money was running out faster than they had expected.

In Kempton, Tony went straight to the reference library. He looked up the Encyclopaedia Britannica for the I.R.A. It was undoubtedly a highly dangerous organization from the British viewpoint. The same evening he wrote three letters with his left hand: to the Home Office, the Personnel Department of Globe-Kem Company, and Neil's wife. The first two letters were brief, businesslike and identical, except for Neil's address (residential in one case, and official in the other):

'Mr Neil Mahoney of — — was actively connected with the dangerous and unlawful activities of the Irish Republican Army before and during the Second World War. He was even arrested once by the Irish police. A perusal of Dublin papers of those times would prove the authenticity of the above statements. To allow such an anti-British foreigner to make his living on British soil . . .'

Tony was brief and cryptic with Neil's wife as well:

'Your husband, by virtue of his sinful behaviour with the wife of a fellow-Catholic, has earned for himself enough wrath to suffer the fires of Hell for times immemorial. This is no slander, sister; it is the heart-rending confession of the

Wronged Husband. Please take him back to the path of sanity and virtue; take him back to Ireland.

A Brother-in-Faith.'

He marked the envelope 'Personal and Private' and mailed it from Raddington.

Dev had thrown his net far and wide in America for an admission and scholarship from a university but had had no catch. He had soon realized that a scholarship was far beyond his waters; but when even an admission letter eluded him for months, he began to worry. Then, suddenly, he ran into favourable waters and had two admission letters.

So, if he could muster a sum of £650 he could go to America. And that was £550 more than what he actually had, or £450 more if he sold his car, cashed his holidays and received his income-tax refund. At £5 a week it would take him ninety weeks to save that sum. Nearly two years. When each day was twenty-three hours too long for him, two years seemed a millenium. He was afraid of stagnating. He felt that if he stood still for long he would rot and crumble, be reduced to nothing. He had to move on—east, to home; or west, to America. But his home, physical home, signified spiritual capitulation, a different kind of death. So he had to press westward, find £500; and soon.

What the American Consulate wanted was a bank statement, he thought. It was not essential that he *own* the money he had in the bank in his name. He could borrow from friends, get the statement and then return the sums. It was that simple.

Or was it? Bruce did not think so. He called it fraud. And, surprisingly enough, Dev agreed with him, which put Bruce in a quandary, who said, apologetic, 'I'd like to help you but I must consult my wife in this matter.'

'You could tell her about the personal loans from banks, the latest sign of prosperity.'

'It's a phoney prosperity built on the sands of H.P.,' Bruce maintained. 'One of these days it'll fall—crash!'

'I hope I won't be around then.'

'You should be helping your own country.'

'Nobody is missing me there,' Dev reassured Bruce, but Bruce did not look convinced.

Tony would have agreed with him if he were there, Dev thought; but telling Tony so would have been superfluous. Tony was still half asleep, and in his bath-robe, when Dev called on him the following morning. The lounge had the air of a bachelor's quarters: socks and napkins lay strewn over the floor and furniture; ash-trays spilled over with cigarette-butts; the large painting hung lopsided.

Tony listened quietly, sipping his whiskey and soda, as Dev revealed his plan. 'The situation is very fluid with me,' Tony said, finally, with a long sigh. 'We're both waiting for Monica's father to return.'

'And hoping for the best?'

'Quite. Hope is the essence of life.'

'Drinking turns you into a philosopher.'

'It's my only friend. That's why Monica keeps me well-supplied. I have too many problems on my mind. There are instalments on all these to be paid,' he said with a sweeping gesture round the room. 'Money, and time, will solve that. But what will solve my spiritual problems? I may be excommunicated.'

'Why? Is it the abor——?'

'Abortion? How did you know?' Tony cried.

'Just a rumour, a rumour,' Dev mumbled, fidgeting with his cigarette. 'Long time ago.'

'It's the bloody rumours and innuendoes that get on my nerves,' Tony said, upturning the cushions on the couch. 'Where's that bloody lighter? It was somewhere here before you came in. I can't find a thing nowadays, not a thing.' He rummaged through the lounge without success, then, in sheer despair, accepted a light from Dev, and took a series of puffs from his cigarette. 'Someone wrote an anonymous

letter to the priest, I understand. That started the whole thing.'

'But surely, they wouldn't act on such flimsy grounds.'

'One never knows. In any case, it's a long drawn out process. I envy you bachelors, not a worry in the world. Take my advice: sleep with as many English girls as you can, but never marry one. But, of course, you're going to America; so it doesn't really matter.'

'Trying to go.'

'You'll make it. It's in your face, a certain doggedness, under a smooth surface of intellect.'

'You read too much in faces.'

'I wish I had read enough in Monica's: it'd have saved me a lot of trouble. In the heat of passion most couples ignore so much. We did, Monica and I. We went into marriage feeling brave and unconventional, not knowing we were just starting a hazardous journey. I feel, more and more, that the Hindu way of marriage is the best. After all, parents know better than immature young couples.'

'I'm afraid you're swinging out to the other extreme. Excuse me,' Dev said, getting up, 'but I must use the bathroom.'

'Let me get you a clean towel.'

To Dev's surprise, Tony found a clean towel. Dev entered the bathroom, careful not to step on the dirty underwear or slip on a bar of soap.

'Why don't you join my syndicate?' Tony asked suddenly, standing outside the bathroom.

'What syndicate?'

'Football pools. In my office.'

'But I don't work in your office.'

'Don't worry. You can still join. Through me. I'll see to that.'

'Let me think.'

'Have you seen your Scottish friend Bruce?' Tony enquired.

'I'm staying with him.'

'Yes, you told me. How silly of me to forget. I can't remember a thing nowadays.'

'He's glad you got him that new house.'

'He ought to be. It's hard to buy a moderately priced new house in this area. I saved him all the estate-agent's fees as well.'

A few hours later they drove to the High Street in Tony's station-wagon, debating whether to go to the Odeon or the nearest pub. Dev preferred a pub; but Tony pointed to the long line outside the Odeon, 'It might be a good film.'

'I doubt it,' Dev said trailing behind Tony as they were walking past the line.

A hand stretched out to grasp Dev's. 'Look, who's here!' Neil blurted out.

Dev looked ahead: Tony was still walking. 'Tony!' he called.

Tony stopped, looked back sharply: his eyes caught Neil's. He stood rigid, hostile, his fists clenched.

'How about a drink?' Neil suggested to Dev.

'All right.'

Tony turned about and resumed walking—well ahead of Dev and Neil—and entered the nearest pub.

'I'll get the first round,' Neil offered. 'What will you have?' he asked Dev.

'Younger's.'

'And you?' Neil turned to Tony.

'Whiskey and soda,' Tony replied stiffly.

'And a Guinness for me,' Neil said to the barman.

They drank quietly, prisoners of the past, unable to break down the barriers. Finally, Dev looked at Neil and said, 'You must have relatives in America, being Irish.'

'Quite a few, as a matter of fact,' Neil said. 'So many, that I don't keep track of them, except an old aunt whom I send a card every Christmas. Why?'

'I'm thinking of going there,' Dev replied, 'if I can raise a loan from friends like you.'

'I'm leaving myself.'

'Where to?'

'Double Scotch!' Tony ordered. 'This round is on me.'

'Back to Belfast, my wife's hometown,' Neil replied. 'She just can't stay away from it.'

Or is it that you can't stay here—with the Home Office trailing you, Paddy? Tony thought to himself, satisfied. 'Women are so sentimental,' Tony said.

'Mine is oversentimental,' Neil said. 'She never missed her copy of the *Belfast Sentinel*, and a look at the appointments page. So she knew the moment my old aircraft company began advertising for draughtsmen.'

She knew the moment she received an anonymous letter about your infidelities, Paddy—Tony retorted, but only in a whisper.

'The aircraft company may have got a new contract,' Dev said.

'Yes, they have. And there goes my wife, writing to the Personnel Manager on her own. Not a word to me. The next thing I know, she throws a letter in my lap, smiling. We'll take you back, the Personnel Manager says; count your previous service, pay your removal expenses. What could I do?' Neil looked askance. 'And you know the first thing she says to me: now, at least, the kids will have a proper education, in a Catholic school. Proper, I says under my breath.'

'A bloody lie—I was saying under my breath,' Tony told Dev. But that was much later, after Tony and Dev had returned to the privacy of Tony's living room. 'Neil was telling bloody lies. I know the true story,' he said, smiling cryptically. 'A tooth for a tooth, a letter for a letter.'

Dev nodded a polite, unknowing 'Yes.'

'Life is a gamble, you know,' Tony said to Dev, as if sharing a secret formula for forging bank notes. 'Don't forget to leave a pound with me, if you decide to join the syndicate.'

Dev gave Tony a pound note

It was painful for Dev to have to listen to Bruce explain

why he couldn't help him: his wife wanted him to use the personal loan for buying a car. 'Every day she tells me that ours is the only house in the street with an empty garage,' Bruce said sheepishly. 'She is even prepared to forgo our holidays for it.'

So the Children of Depression had become the Slaves of Affluence, Dev concluded sadly.

He hadn't a friend who would help him with money. Arjun would have liked to help him, but in another way: 'If you return to Bombay, I promise you a job as my deputy. I am the Assistant Works Manager here—with a company car.'

Irrked by the continuous overtime, the Drawing Office draughtsmen met in the canteen one Saturday afternoon, and decided to do 'something' if the free overtime did not stop in a fortnight. It did not. They met at Ray's place the following Sunday—all of them except Will DeBruin who preferred a meeting of the local branch of the Pure Movement. After a long, weary discussion, they decided to petition the management for time-and-a-half payment for overtime to be paid retrospectively. It was another three weeks before they agreed on the wording of the petition, Will raising the most objections. It took another week to decide the order of signing: strictly alphabetical. Almost two months had gone by since their first meeting in July.

After Ray had left the petition on the boss's desk in his absence, the draughtsmen waited anxiously for the reaction. But nothing happened. The boss said nothing about the petition; the notice about overtime appeared on Friday as usual.

The draughtsmen were awed: the management seemed impregnable, well above reacting to their little sufferings. But not exactly. On Saturday when Ray was asked to stay back, they guessed something was up.

On Monday they knew it: Ray was missing. Was he sacked or suspended?—was he sent on a forced holiday?—

or was he ill? Toby was the most anxious. During lunch hour he cycled to Ray's place and returned excited and angry. 'Suspended for two weeks, and asked to keep his mouth shut,' he told them at the office.

The same evening they gathered at Ray's place.

'Strike!' cried a young voice.

'That'll be too radical,' said a middle-aged face.

'Most likely illegal,' said an old voice, full of fear.

'We are family men.'

'So is Ray going to be: getting married,' announced Toby.
'He's suffering for us.'

'Yes. We have to show them we're all together.'

'Don't let them get away with this.'

'We must do something.'

'Mild.'

'But definite.'

'Abstain for a day.'

'They may not pay.'

'Half a day, then.'

'They may still not pay us.'

'Make it two hours' token delay—and I'm with you.'

'All right.'

'Fine.'

'Fine Everybody comes in two hours late,' Ray declared.

'Make it Friday.'

'Friday it is. Those in favour . . .'

All hands went up, Dev raising both hands.

'Now the loss of pay Ray has suffered for us,' Toby said.
'He's getting married soon.'

'He's a jolly good fellow!' they burst out singing.

Dev sang loud and clear, but later he began to have his doubts. Supposing the management got tough on them: who would get sacked first? Him. There was no doubt about that. Would others come out with him then? No. Even for Ray they had acted laconically. What then of his plans to save £5 a week?

On Thursday Dev fell ill. At least that was what he told

his boss through the guest house maid. He even went to the doctor and got a prescription. He stayed 'sick' the next day as well, and travelled to London early on Saturday to meet Mabel who had responded warmly to a letter he had written her.

'You look mellowed,' he said to Mabel, though he meant she looked pallid.

'It's a mellowing job.'

'In the company of a child-care officer?'

'So Arjun told you. It doesn't matter now, he's out. There's another man on the horizon. I met him at a party. He was speaking with a slight Indian accent, I could tell. It sounded ever so odd, an Englishman speaking with an Indian accent. He said the environment always had an effect on you, no matter where you were. That was his theory.'

'And my theory is that he's from Kempton, has blue eyes and ginger hair, and is called John Tomlinson.'

'How did you know?'

'A little bird whispered it to me,' Dev replied, and went on to tell her how. 'I had a hunch I'd be hearing more about that man.'

'It really is a small world '

'That's how I like to treat it—small—and move from one country to another as if I were moving from one city to another.'

'Are you going back home?'

'Where I live, that's home.'

'But you can't feel attached to every country you live in. Besides, one must belong to some place, some country.'

'Nonsense. Look at the history of man. He has moved from loyalty to a tribe to loyalty to a nation state, a bigger entity. Is loyalty to mankind-at-large too far in the future?'

'You and your pitiless logic: always expounding some idealistic view.'

'The dreams of yesterday are the realities of today. Take away from man his faculty to imagine and you've reduced him to the level of an animal.'

'All right, dreamer, if not home, where else?'

'America. To read books, and more books.'

'Which will cost you dollars and more dollars.'

'That's why I'm here.'

'You're wasting your time: I have no money.'

'You don't have to have it. It's like this,' he began, and went on to tell her his plan.

'Sounds exciting: but how will I get the money? I have an overdraft with my bank.'

'What about this rich boyfriend of yours? The one who is literally robbing the poor Indians.'

'You have the check,' she said, crumpling her face. 'You want me to beg for you from another boyfriend?'

'You don't have to beg,' he said calmly. 'How friendly are you with him?'

'How intimate, you mean?' she said, breaking out in a smile. 'Very.'

'Good. This is what we'll do then . . .'

Mabel listened carefully. After a brief reflection, she said, 'I don't know why I'm doing this for you, but I'm going to.'

'When will you see him?'

'He'll pick me up this evening. I should start getting ready soon,' she said, standing up. 'Better phone me first before coming in tomorrow—just to be sure.'

Dev passed each hour from Mabel's room like one long day. He phoned her early next morning. It was all clear.

'Did you manage it?' he asked her. She nodded yes. 'Why didn't you tell me on the phone?'

'Because I liked to keep you waiting,' she said and smiled, revealing her black incisor tooth. 'Don't worry. It's done, not the whole book, just one cheque—when he had gone to the bathroom last night.'

'Brilliant. Why didn't we think of that before? Now get me some of his letters to you.'

'Why?'

'No whys,' he said sternly. Then he smiled and said, 'No questions, please. This will need a lot of concentration.'

She gave him a letter. He put a waxy-paper he had under the letter, and transferred the words—Mabel, John, etc.—with a blunt pencil. Mabel watched, fascinated and censorious. Soon he was holding the whole alphabet in John's handwriting before her. 'I want you to practise the alphabet from this,' he told her.

'I'm doing nothing of the sort,' she said, nervous. 'I've done enough. Besides, there's no need for all that. Just type out the cheque and sign it.'

'You mean he types his cheques? I don't think so. We must do all this scientifically.'

'Crookedly—you mean,' she said acidly. 'Aren't you nervous?'

'A bit.'

'You're a born crook.'

'Noble ends, ignoble means. Galileo is my hero.'

'Let's call this off,' she said suddenly, apprehensive. 'I don't like it.'

'Nor do I. But I am desperately desperate. I want to get out of your bloody country.'

'How much are you going to write?'

'All the £300 I need.'

'Oh, no!' she shouted. 'Not that much. Write £100. No more.'

'We'll meet half way; I'll make it £200.' He began writing.

She left the room saying she did not want to be a witness to a *crime*, but when she returned to his table and compared the cheque with John's letter to her, she couldn't help exclaiming, 'Ingenious!'

Still, she did not give him her own cheque until after she had actually deposited John's cheque in her account on Monday.

'Make yours an odd figure like £197-13-6,' he suggested.

'I hope everything works out well,' she said, handing him her cheque.

Total involvement in procuring money had left Dev impervious to the protest of his colleagues, but he couldn't

help noticing the glimmer in their eyes when Ray returned to work on Wednesday. It was the first sign of their victory.

All through the episode Ray had been meticulously briefed by Toby. At their canteen table Ray told Dev, 'No one expected Will to join, but what happened to you? You just disappeared.'

'I had my reasons,' Dev said, apologetic. 'But I put in my share of money. I even offered to pay Will's share.'

'And that son-of-a-bitch said he'd have nothing to do with anything Dev was in. Why is he so much against you?'

'I don't think he's against me as a person; he's against us as people. There are many others like him in this country.'

Ray fell silent, aware that, at heart, he too was one of those people.

'The same week, overtime on Saturdays ceased: the second sign of victory.

It was a nuisance being without a car, Dev thought, as he walked, a newspaper over his head, from the bus stop to Susan's bed-sitting room. He hoped it would be a temporary one: he would have a bigger, better car in America.

Susan noticed his wet overcoat. 'Is your car in the garage again?' she asked him.

'No, I sold it.'

'Are you getting a better one?'

'No; this is why,' he started explaining, but did not get the chance to finish: Susan was crying, tears rolling off her pouchy cheeks. 'Don't be silly,' he said. 'I'm not going off to fight a war, you know.'

'I'm so . . . so used to . . . to you,' she managed to say. 'I knew . . . I knew you weren't Dave . . . or an Anglo-Indian . . . I knew . . .'

'Did you?' he asked, recoiling with shock.

'But I don't hold that against you,' she said, wiping her tears. 'In a way I enjoyed your lie. You're a good liar, always alert.'

'How did you find out then?'

'Not through you. Mabel Mulberry.'

'And how did you know *her*?'

'Oh, on a Christmas job, once. In the G.P.O. We were in the same section, Continental calls. I know French and Dutch; had a Dutch boyfriend once.'

'We have an Anglo-Dutch in our office, Will DeBruin.'

'I know him,' she said, cryptically. 'He's a terrible man.'

'Just terrible ideas, that's all.'

'They have some weird plans. You know the row at the Trapeze.'

'Yes But that's all over now, or will be, when the City Council doesn't renew their licence.'

'But the times they had troubles: the pickets, the fights and everything '

'I picketed there myself—once '

'It can't be,' she said with a sudden vehemence.

'I picketed there, so I should know.'

'You weren't there,' she insisted, 'not in the list.'

'What list?'

'I don't want to talk about it,' she said, and walked abruptly to the window 'I still don't see the milkman. He does have a long lie-in on Sundays '

'What about the list?' he persisted, squeezing her shoulders.

'Nothing, nothing,' she replied. 'Will is a terrible drunk. He shouldn't drink but he does. And when he does, he lets out a lot. With me he did. We spoke in Dutch, that's how we met at the Europa Club. There,' she said, looking out again, 'there comes the milk cart.' She tried to move away.

'No; finish the Europa Club.'

'Did you know he's active with the Pure Movement?'

'We all know that—at the office.'

'Well, I tell you, they have the names and addresses of all the pickets at the Trapeze, all the letter-writers for coloured immigration, all the——' The door bell rang. 'That's the milkman,' she said, running off.

She returned, breathless, as if she had been carrying

bottles of lead, instead of milk. 'I'm getting old,' she moaned, sitting down. 'How old do you think I am? You never asked me that, have you?'

'It wasn't necessary.'

'That's just like you: more interested in ideas than in people.'

'Ideas live longer than individuals.'

'Perhaps they do,' she said, licking her buck teeth with her tongue. 'But it's the individual that can give you the money you need. Individuals like me.'

'How much?'

'All that I have. It isn't much. Only £80.'

'Every bit helps.'

'I'm giving it to you, not lending it.'

Dev was touched. Eighty, plus two hundred, plus a hundred and twenty-five pounds that he had saved. It added up to £405, only £45 short.

Chapter Fifteen

A month had gone by since Dev had sent in his application for an American visa. Though he expressed puzzled surprise at the delay in reply to Mabel's urgent letters to him, he knew that the Consulate authorities were reluctant to accept his financial credentials. To this, another fear had lately been added: in reply to a question on the application form regarding the applicant's political affiliations (since the age of 16), he had replied 'None' only to realize, later, that he had once paid dues for the Neoleft Club, he had addressed a Young People's League seminar which had been reported in the press and he had looked prominent, thanks to his pigmented skin, in the Ban-the-Bomb and Anti-Apartheid demonstrations. He couldn't dismiss the idea that the Home Office had a dossier on him and that one of the attendees at the Y.P.L. seminar was an informer. And yet he was expected to believe that he lived in the 'free world'. He was certain to be refused a visa if the American Consulate discovered anything in his past which could be labelled 'Communitic'.

They were conducting 'routine' checks on him at Bombay, and the slow wheels of Indian bureaucracy were causing the delay, he explained to Mabel, who unable to wait any longer, phoned him one night.

'But you said it'll be two or three weeks; it's already six weeks,' she grumbled.

'I know. Just wait a day or two longer. I'll phone the Consulate myself, and find out.'

But he dared not phone them for fear of arousing their suspicion. Another week, another frantic call from Mabel. The situation was getting unbearable.

One Saturday morning, he was stepping on a bus, engrossed in his problems, when an angry arm swung a suitcase at him and pushed him off the bus. 'Why didn't you turn up at the station?' Mabel cried.

'What station?' he asked, still wobbling on his feet.

'Don't you read letters?'

'Not yours.'

'Not mine,' she shouted. 'You lying scoundrel. You promised to return the money in two weeks.'

'Now—please, let's not make a scene here.'

'John is signing up a new contract for India.'

'Good luck to him.'

'What about *my* luck? He'll soon find out. Can't you see that, you selfish cad? He'll settle his account with the bank before leaving. And I'm having nightmares about the whole thing: haven't slept a wink for nights.'

'And you show it.'

'Oh! You are a rude bastard as well. I want the money NOW!'

'Don't shout.'

'I'll scream till hell freezes over,' she threatened, encouraged by the crowd that was slowly gathering around them.

'Or your lungs burst open,' he said, and started to walk away.

'Oh, no! You can't walk away like that,' she shouted, clawing his arm.

'Let go, you dirty bitch!' he growled, and hit her wrist.

The next moment he was running madly, his hand over his hip-pocket to keep the coins from jingling, a few men from the crowd chasing him, shouting 'Get him! Get him!'. An oncoming man held out a hand to catch him, but Dev flung his fist so hard the man went down reeling. Dev ran faster. He could hear a train coming. Madly he raced over

the tracks seconds before the train came rolling over. He dived into the open end of a laundry truck, past layers of dresses and suits, and fell exhausted in a dark corner.

It was a long time before he dared come out.

Cups of tea and many newspapers at the railway station buffet, then a phone call to his landlady to ask about any post from the American Consulate.

'I'm glad you phoned, Mr Verma,' the landlady said. 'There's a young lady waiting for you here. Do you want to talk to her?'

'I'll be there myself—shortly.'

Mabel and Dev greeted each other edgily in the landlady's presence, then went to his room.

'Thank your stars you're not in jail,' she flashed the moment they were in his room 'I had to drag out a chap from a phone box who was calling the police '

'And you thank yours that you haven't lost a couple of teeth '

'If you keep on like this, I'm going to Scotland Yard, right now.'

'And get yourself arrested '

'Why me?'

'Because the forged cheque was in *your* name, not mine '

'You dirty crook,' she snarled, jumping at him with her claws.

He had to use all his force and cunning to disengage himself from her, and pin her down in the armchair with his hands holding her wrists over her heaving breasts. 'Whether you like it or not, we are both in this together '

'But you promised you'd return the money in two weeks, and he won't know the difference. It's bloody seven weeks now. What am I to do?' she asked, and began crying. 'What am I to do?'

'Try to understand my side too,' he said, releasing her wrists. 'I can't take any money out until I have the visa in hand. Not before that. No. Suppose the Consulate phones the bank and finds nearly half the money gone?'

'I don't care what they do or the bank does or you do,' she said in another fit of anger. 'If you don't return my money, I'll tell the Consulate what you've done.'

'And lose your money for ever. There's no proof I *borrowed* it from you,' he said with a triumphant smile.

'You are a real crook, a schemer. But hold your smile. Unless I get the money I won't leave the guest house. Passive resistance, Indian style.'

'Please, Mabel, try to understand,' he appealed. 'Give me a day or two. At least until Monday.'

'All right, Monday,' she said, throwing up her hands in despair. 'But I'm not leaving Cheverly until I have the money. I'll stay with Susan.'

'Oh, no,' he said. 'Try my old landlady. She's reasonable. I'll pay your charges; I'll take you there.'

There was only one person whom Dev could approach for help: Tony. And he would have to plead hard before Tony. He would have to run away from Mabel anyway: he couldn't possibly face another scene with her on Monday. He boarded the first train to Kempton on Sunday morning.

'This is telepathy,' Tony said, his hand still on the door knob. 'I tried to get you on the phone last night, but they said you weren't there.'

'Yer, I was at my old landlady's place.'

'I wanted to break the news to you directly. We won the pools, man!'

'How much?'

'Hundred and eighty-nine pounds odd shillings a share.'

'Thank you, friend,' Dev shook Tony's hand, beaming with a smile. 'You're my saviour'

'You didn't come all the way to shake hands with me,' Tony said, bewildered: Dev had already turned around to leave.

'I might have.'

Mabel cheered as easily as she had frowned and fretted before. When she had told him in London that she was going to live 'by impulse' he had not taken her seriously.

He had asked her why she had left him at Oxford, and she had replied nonchalantly, 'No particular reason, just the wrong time of the month,' and he had not believed that either; but when later she had agreed to forge a cheque for him without much persuasion he was convinced that she was really making decisions 'by impulse'.

But Dev could not afford to relax: he still did not have the visa.

Finally, one drizzling afternoon, when he did receive a letter bearing the emblem of the American eagle, he had difficulty reading it coherently: '...are advised... interview... any time during working hours... blood-test... X-ray...'

The letter did not make sense to him: on one hand they were calling him for an interview (which meant the decision on the visa had not been taken), on the other hand they were asking him to bring medical certificates (which meant the interview was just a formality). But it was no use speculating. It was time to act.

Within three days of receiving the letter, Dev was at the Consulate. The slim, soft voiced Vice-Consul told him, rather severely, that his financial position was weak.

'Yes, sir—weak it is,' he admitted.

'What are you going to do about it?'

'Work.'

'You can't work on a student visa,' the Vice-Consul said sharply, clutching his papers. 'Didn't you read the pamphlet we sent you with the letter. You all go there under false impressions.'

'Work hard—in this country—sir.'

The Vice-Consul flipped a few pages and said, brooding, 'Quite a few degrees, already.'

'Yes—sir.'

'Three years in this country? Did you enjoy your stay here?' the Vice-Consul asked, scrutinizing a page. 'Very nice people, the English, polite, civic-minded. And

politically conscious,' he said, opening the top-drawer of his steel desk.

This was it, Dev shuddered: the dossier on him with the pictures of the Ban-the-Bomb march, the Y.P.L. seminar news cutting, etc.—he saw the end of all his plans. He felt dizzy. As he gripped the back of a chair he saw the Vice-Consul turn into a dark patch on the wall, a cloud of smoke rise. He felt his nostrils burn with a pungent smell, and the next moment, his dizzy spell gone, he found the Vice-Consul smoking a pipe, reflecting over his papers.

'Weak on money, but strong on ambition,' the Vice-Consul said at last. 'Okay, we'll let you in. Now raise your right hand and swear . . .'

There were still tears of happiness in Dev's eyes when half an hour later he was talking to Mabel on the phone.

'What a contrast!' Mabel said, excited. 'You going West, while I go East, to India.'

'As Mrs Tomlinson?'

'He'd like me to. But I haven't had the impulse yet. India would be ideal for social work, don't you think?'

'They could soak up thousands like you—with social work, that is.'

'I'd love that.'

'Would you like to have Arjun's address?'

'I have it. He still writes to me.'

So did Arjun keep writing to Dev. Arjun was a compulsive letter-writer; but he always had something to tell:

'After my six months' probation, I have been confirmed as the Assistant Works Manager. A lot of change is brewing up in the company hierarchy. The present Works Manager is going back to Sweden, and the management has appointed their British expert in Arqua Ltd., John Tomlinson, as the new Works Manager. How does a shipping expert fit as the head of a manufacturing workshop, I don't know. Nor do I care, engrossed as I am in my matrimonial affairs.

'I was engaged to be married a week ago. The girl's father

has his own engineering business near Delhi. Her name is Chitra Sahni. They are Punjabis, as you probably guessed from the surname. To you it may mean nothing, but for the people of my community it is a revolutionary step to marry outside my Sindhi language group.

'Don't ask me about the dowry . . . it was my parents' job. I have a notion it is a big sum. After all, it cost a lot for my education in England and the loss of my pay when I was studying there.

'I would like you to attend my wedding which is on December 28th—a weekday. But then it is the astrologer who determines the most auspicious day. Don't tell me horoscopes are exclusively Eastern or superstitious, because I know every popular tabloid in England carries a bit of astrology every day . . .'

Arjun and Chitra! Dev smiled meaningfully.

In Kempton, Bruce had moved up, from a senior draughtsman to a group leader; he had turned down a private offer of the secretaryship of the local Technicians' Union, because his wife hadn't liked the idea—so he told Dev on a Christmas card.

Bruce already sounded like a middle-aged man with a paunch, drinking his pint in the pub, telling and retelling the stories of 'the bad old days'—the fist fights in the collieries, the strikes, the police firings, the soup and bread lines—like an old record running, a faded, insipid voice. What sort of stories would the middle-aged Ray tell in his favourite pub? A pathetic petition to the management, a pathetic mimicry of the director's Oxford accent. Or would he, in a few years' time, be too lazy to move his arse from in front of the telly to go to his pub? He was getting married soon, settling down.

On Ray's wedding day, Dev cycled furiously to arrive on time at the church on Brambledown Street, where Ray lived, but found the Anglican church there deserted. At last, after

much enquiring and cycling, he reached the Methodist church on Bramblebury Road, thirsty for champagne.

He wandered into the church hall; and ran into Tony and Monica: 'What brings you here?' he asked, surprised.

'The bride,' Tony replied.

'Didn't you know?' Monica asked Dev.

'No, I was late for the ceremony.'

'You missed kissing the bride, then,' Monica said, smiling.

'He has had enough of that, I'm sure,' Tony grinned.

What's the joke, Dev was about to ask—when Toby came over and said, 'Have you a light?'

'Yes,' Dev replied, turning to Toby: he saw the bride radiant in her wedding dress. Thrusting a match box in Toby's hand he walked toward her as if in a trance: 'Pamela!'

'You——' Pamela said, screwing up her eyes. In a moment she seemed to have lost all her radiance.

'What happened to your lovely mole?'

'Did you know each other before?' Ray enquired, unable to neglect the man who was wondering aloud about his wife's mole.

'Slightly, very slightly,' Pamela replied. 'There goes my mother,' she said, disengaging herself from Ray's hand. 'I absolutely must talk to her.'

'Thank you,' Toby said, returning the match box to Dev. 'Want some more champagne?'

'I need it,' Dev replied, watching Ray follow Pamela with long strides. 'Why does she act like this . . . Never mind.'

'Why are you so nervous?' Ray asked, catching up with Pamela. 'Did you two——'

'Who's nervous?' Pamela snapped. 'You're so jealous. It was nothing—nothing. Just a couple of dances in a dance hall.'

'Why go so pale then?'

'Not him Not because of him. He always reminds me of someone—someone who went to India.'

'I thought you were through with him.'

'No, he came back. Only a few days ago . . . we had a row . . . he called me a simple little girl . . . It's all very complicated . . . Why are we . . . ? Now we're married, darling,' Pamela said, and pressing his hand kissed him.

'That was real,' the photographer croaked, flashing his camera. 'None of them phoney acts.'

'Thank you,' Pamela said. 'Oh mother, before you . . .

'What happened to her mole?' Dev repeated as if he were Newton meditating over the fallen apple.

'Her lover bit it off, angry that she had married someone else.' Monica gave her brittle laugh exposing the partition of her nose.

'You look happy,' Dev said.

'Her father is back,' Tony explained.

'You?' Toby asked Tony as he was filling Monica's glass.

'Sssh . . . ' Monica said, holding her finger to her lips. 'My lips are sealed: the test was positive.'

'You too?' Toby asked, looking at Dev.

'We three. By next Christmas, we three,' Monica cried, rubbing her stomach.

'Quite,' Tony slurred absently. 'No—quiet, quiet. Not so loud.'

'It's a wedding party,' Monica said. '*And* the Christmas season.' She drained her glass then held it up.

'Not so fast,' Tony said. 'It's bick . . . bick . . . bickase you drrrink fast . . . Come . . . come . . . come and sit down,' he insisted, pulling her by the arm.

'Bye, bye,' Monica cried. 'Bye, bye!'

'Bye, bye!' Toby said. 'She's very jolly,' he whispered to Dev.

'She should be if you knew the whole story,' Dev said with a smile—and then: 'So would I be, if you introduce me around. After all, you're the best man.'

'Of course, of course,' Toby said, and led Dev to the nearest knot of people.

Looking down at the small bedraggled Personnel Manager wearing a high-winged collar, Dev said, 'You know

how to get more draughtsmen in your company?' The Personnel Manager smiled benignly. 'Just pay more, pay more than the Union rates.' The Personnel Manager said nothing, just smiled. Dev disliked the smug smile of the red faced pygmy, and said in an insistent voice: 'Just pay more.'

'You're going to America anyway,' the Personnel Manager said at last. 'They pay well there.'

'What do you think of the Americans, how they witch-hunt the Reds and send troops to escort kids to a school?' someone asked.

'What's the difference? Here the West Indians get beaten at police stations, and not a word in the press,' Dev replied.

'This is a free country with a free press'—it was Will's nasal accent.

'Free indeed. Not a single paper dared say that the limping photographer was courting a second-rate actress before hitting the royal heights.'

'Where do you get that dirty gossip?' Will enquired loudly.

'From an American news magazine.'

'And you believe it?'

'Why not?'

'You're a flaming red,' Will announced, thrusting his nicotine-stained index finger at Dev.

'For believing a popular American news magazine?'

'I'm glad you're leaving the country before being thrown out.'

'I might have been if the Pure Movement had won the elections.'

'It will. It will, if the flood of coloured immigrants continues like this.'

'If the shipping in and out is to start, let's ship out all the whites from Africa and Asia; and hand over the Americas and Australia to the Indians and Aborigines.'

'But we'll keep South Africa.'

'Why?'

'Because we developed it. It's the only country worth living in.'

'The only country worth leaving.'

'Leaving? This is the country to leave—England—before the coloureds take over. I hope my application for transfer to our South African branch goes through.'

'But they have a very small office there,' said Toby, who was the only person not driven away by the snarling of Dev and Will.

'Yes, I know that,' Will said, 'but you see, Globe-Kem is about to sign a big contract there. So off I go, out of this wog-loving country.'

'Watch your language, whitey,' Dev said, as Toby asked: 'When?'

'Mr DeBruin?' the grey-haired minister said, thrusting his face in the midst of a trio. 'There's a phone call for you in my office.'

Will almost ran.

'Fifteen-twelve?' the voice over the phone asked.

'Twelve-fifteen,' Will replied.

'All clear.'

'All pure.'

'Tonight is off. It's Christmas Eve.'

'We knew that. Didn't we?'

'Yes. But no newspapers on Christmas Day.'

'What next?'

'The same. But tomorrow'

'Dot, dot.'

'Dot, dot; dot, dot.'

Will put the receiver down and went to the toilet.

The landlady at the guest house thought it preposterous that Dev should be travelling on Christmas Day 'Think of the Christmas dinner you'll be missing,' she said.

'I know,' Dev nodded. 'But it's the argument with this chap—well, it has spoiled everything. I wish I could leave right away, but there's no chance of getting on a train on Christmas Eve.'

'Goodbye, then. Leave the key at the serving hatch if I don't see you in the morning.'

London was quiet and serene on Christmas—and lazy on Boxing Day. Dev caught the mood of the city, and passed most of his time sleeping. After a late breakfast, he picked up a morning paper. The headline of 'First Cross Burning in the Country' on the back page drew his attention:

Is It KKK?

(From Our Own Correspondent)

The police are investigating cross burning incidents outside three houses in Cheverly, Bloomshire, on Christmas night.

The fact that the crosses were of the same size and were burnt on the same night has led to speculation that the cross burning is probably the work of some clandestine organization . .

He recognized one of the pictures next to the news item: it was Mac's guest house where he and some Afro-Asian students lived. He knew. Within minutes, he was talking to a telephone operator at the Cheverly central police station.

'What is it about?' she asked.

'Cross burning.'

'Oh yes, crime investigation. Just a moment please.'

'What do you wish to say, sir?' a male voice asked.

'Those cross burning incidents,' Dev began, putting his hand around the mouthpiece.

'You'll have to speak louder, sir.'

'That cross burning incident: investigate Will DeBruin, draughtsman with Hareson, Knox and Brown Limited, and a member of the Pure Movement; contact Susan Williams, phone 87843, she knows about the Movement and their plans against racial . . .'

'Your name, sir?'

'Alpha Omega.'

Alpha, the beginning; Omega, the end. The end of India was the beginning of England. Now the end of England was

to be the beginning of America. His life was to be a series of beginnings and ends all joined together by his lust for exploration. The whole world was his home. If only Helen had viewed the world as he did. Helen: still the beat of his heart. He read the letter he had written her.

‘Dear Helen:

Time, space and man. In this intrinsically infinite time and space how ridiculously does man—a mere cipher in the vast universe—set up measures of time and space, slicing off one day from the next, one place from the other.

The beginning of a journey is as exciting as the beginning of a new life . . .’

It sounded so much like Mool Chand, his grandfather. He had become his own Mool Chand.

Dev could not decide whether he should post the letter to Helen. It was still with him, in his inside coat pocket, when he had settled down in his berth on a Cunard liner. He lay down, thinking. Yes, he’d post it. It would not compromise his pride. There was nothing personal in the letter at all.

He went to the book shop to get stamps. They had none; but the sales girl tore off one from her own stamp booklet. He thanked her, bought a lunch edition of the *Evening Standard*, and posted the letter.

Back in his cabin he began browsing through the paper :
THE FIRST ARREST IN CROSS BURNING CASE.

The police have taken into custody Mr Willem Piet DeBruin, 40, of 1807 Wilberforce Road . . .

Dev threw the paper down, and strode to the first class lounge.

‘What would you like, SIR?’ the barman asked.